

Women's Lives and Poverty:

Developing a Framework and Real Reform for Welfare

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The federal welfare reform of 1996 has cut welfare rolls by close to 60 percent in most states, but it has not succeeded in moving poor women out of poverty. Instead, most former welfare recipients have moved into tenuous low-wage, low-benefit jobs that keep them below the poverty line and often in more poverty than when they were receiving welfare and other government subsidies. At least one million mothers and two million children each month find themselves both jobless and without welfare payments, mired in the “deep poverty” category of those who earn less than half the federal poverty level.

The Research

“Researchers and scholars have been slow to bring attention to poor women raising families on their own and to the disconnect between their real lives and the statistics that report on their lives,” Professor Mary Gatta and Luisa S. Deprez concluded. “While it is true that welfare numbers are down, those who have been forced off or have left welfare are not doing well at all.”

The analysis by Gatta and Deprez is the lead article in a special issue of the Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare devoted to reexamining fundamental assumptions about the success of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, the welfare-to-work legislation signed by President Clinton that replaced Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) with the time-limited Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program.

While the research was conducted prior to the national recession that started in December 2007, their findings and their central argument are even more relevant in a recession that is eliminating tens of thousands of the low-income jobs on which potential welfare recipients depend.

Gatta and Deprez note that the focus has been on statistics showing the reduction in the rate of dependency on welfare and the movement of welfare recipients into ANY job. This ignores the third goal of the 1996 law, which was to make former welfare recipients self-sufficient.

“Poverty performance measures and evaluations that are based exclusively on the number of women who enter the workplace miss whether or how much work has improved their lives and helped them reach self-sufficiency,” they write.

Case Studies

Case studies by other scholars published in the JSSW’s special issue on welfare reform document:

- the barriers faced by women struggling to move into jobs before the expiration of the five-year limit on TANF benefits set by the welfare reform
- the discrimination faced by low-immigrant Mexican women in California trying to move into the job market
- how geographical place affected the job prospects for women trying to move off welfare in two counties in the Mississippi Delta

One of the most striking case studies was conducted among older women in Appalachia, who faced “ageism” in a difficult employment market where they were repeatedly passed over for younger workers. The five-year limit on TANF benefits ignored the fact that 50 percent were providing in-home care for an uninsured spouse without health insurance, 43 percent did not have a high school diploma and 68 percent were unemployed. “Regardless of

situation, limitation or circumstance, they found that their safety net had disappeared: they were denied benefits, required to take 'personal responsibility' for their life situations, and deemed capable of achieving economic independence by entering the labor market," authors Debra Henderson and Ann Tickamyer wrote.

A New School of Poverty Research

These studies of "the lived experience of women" are part of a new school of poverty research, often called

"multicultural feminism," that examines the impact of gender, race, ethnicity, geography and other factors on the prospects for women to achieve self-sufficiency, Gatta and Deprez noted. "While both race and gender shape women's lives, neither theory addresses the experience of race and gender as 'simultaneous and linked social identities.'"

"Given these realities, there needs to be a real reform of welfare," Gatta and Deprez conclude, along with a new social contract. Real welfare reform would meet the following four conditions:

4 Conditions for Real Welfare Reform

- 1. Stop blaming the victim, recognizing that "few people choose to be poor."**
- 2. Assure "a meaningful job that pays a living wage and offers benefits."**
- 3. Recognize that raising children is a legitimate job that should be valued and rewarded, as did the original Aid to Dependent Children program created in the 1930s.**
- 4. Create a new "system of social protection – a new Social Contract – to serve and protect those who cannot participate in the labor market," recognizing that "food, shelter, clothing and a viable education must be entitlements of all American citizens regardless of personal income levels, circumstances and individual choices."**

The "central driver for welfare policy" should be a sophisticated understanding of "the lived experiences of women," not cold statistical measures that fail to capture the price they and their families pay to move from welfare to what is all too often a mythical goal of self-sufficiency.



Dr. Mary Gatta is the Director, Gender and Workforce Policy at the Center for Women, and on the faculty in the Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations at Rutgers University. She holds a PhD and M.A. in Sociology from Rutgers University and a B.A. in Social Science from Providence College. Her areas of expertise include gender and public policy, low-wage workers, earnings inequality, and sex segregation studies.

Dr. Gatta has published several books, articles, and policy papers. Her latest book, *Not Just Getting By: The New Era of Flexible Workforce Development* released from Lexington Press's imprint Press for Change, chronicles groundbreaking thinking and research on new and innovative workforce development initiatives that deliver skills training to single working poor mothers via the Internet.

Her previous book, *Juggling Food and Feelings: Emotional Balance in the Workplace* was released from Lexington Press in 2002. In addition to her books, Dr. Gatta has also published numerous scholarly articles and public policy papers on topics including gender equity in academia, the gender-based pay gap, and welfare policy. Finally, Dr. Gatta was recently elected to a three-year Council term in the American Sociological Association's Sociological Practice Section.