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Moving into the Economic Mainstream

Brunetta R. Wolfman

The requirements for economic mobility in a postindustrial society present many barriers for low-income women. Social policy and program goals for improving their opportunities should focus on educational, training, and entrepreneurial activities using individualized assessment, counseling, and academic and occupational advisers. Social consensus needs to be achieved in order to establish viable programs that address women's total needs rather than approaching the problem with fragmented, uncoordinated solutions.

How does a person whose income is below the poverty level survive in a period of economic prosperity? A lot of low-income women use common sense, food substitutes, grit, and grim optimism to subsist and keep their families together. The poorest people in this country are women and children of all races, and the prospects for improving their circumstances in the 1990s do not appear to be very good.

Many problems confront low-income women, including a lack of education and access to it, family responsibilities, and the nature of the job market. Poor women have many characteristics that are not compatible with the job market requirements of a service-oriented, technological society. In an earlier era labor force needs were less demanding, requiring brawn, willingness, and perseverance, but today brute strength and endurance have been replaced by less discernible attributes. Jobs formerly done by people are being accomplished by machines. Sweatshops and home labor have been phased out or rationalized so that the legendary cleaning woman who raised and educated her children alone has been supplanted by a maintenance company with computer-generated schedules. Some jobs that require no training do, however, require a high school diploma, and often those jobs are in locations remote from those who could fill them.

Many low-income women are hampered by low literacy or educational levels since many were early school dropouts because of adolescent pregnancy or lack of success in school subjects. Even though female educational attainment is slightly higher than that of males, for all races,¹ women constitute a high proportion of adult functional illiterates. Some of the problems of nonreaders originated in the early grades and were not recognized

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or diagnosed by parents or teachers. Added to this are the increasing numbers of foreign-born who have limited literacy in their native language or in English.² Unfortunately, too many American-born women moved through public schools with low reading and math comprehension until they drifted or dropped out, centering their lives around low-paying employment or motherhood.

Our educational institutions pay less attention to the passive than to the disruptive students, so many females sit quietly in class, receiving neither attention nor assistance. Their attendance may have been so sporadic for a variety of reasons that when they no longer appear, no one notices. Until very recently there were only loose local standards for high school graduation, with noticeable differences in urban, suburban, and rural areas, so that graduates were not guaranteed to be equally competent in academic subjects. Since the American educational system has always been closely linked to the class and labor structure, “good education,” generally considered to be college preparatory, has not been the norm for the working and lower classes. Low-income women are caught in a period of transition when there is a discontinuity between their academic preparation, attainment, and the job market.

Today’s Market Requires Basic Skills

The industrial segment of that market has not only shrunk but has been transformed from dirty factory settings to clean laboratory environments, from mindless repetitious assembly lines to worker-controlled lines. Employment applications and work instructions for these new industrial employers assume reading and math competence in accord with the abilities of students of a generation ago. So the dropouts and graduates of the nation’s schools are the beneficiaries of fearful *laissez-faire* educational policies that evolved after legalistic attempts at equity, changes in social values, and adversarial relationships between community and schools, administration and teachers.

However, most of the new jobs are in small businesses and the service sector, ranging from fast foods to financial services, with equally as far-ranging entrance requirements.³ The more sophisticated service companies utilize complex electronic technology, which presumes reading and math skills of sufficient competence to run machines without interruption or to interact with the public accommodatingly. There is also a presumption of a level of socialization that facilitates cooperation with other employees and customers. School dropouts and low-level graduates are then at a further disadvantage, since they have often not succeeded because of failure to understand the necessity of socialization or picked up the clues inherent in the process. It is often circular, because school personnel assume that children arrive with certain social skills, the teaching of which they consider to be the responsibility of the family and community rather than the school; a child does not succeed in school without those social skills.⁴

Multiple Problems Confront Low-Income Women

Even if a low-income woman has the educational preparation necessary to function in the present labor market, her personal situation and family responsibilities may be barriers to employment. The traditional role of mother is compounded with that of head of the household for the majority of low-income women — some never married, some separated, and some divorced.

Many of these women have never worked; they attained motherhood sooner than driver's licenses, high school diplomas, or voting rights. They have been dependent on public assistance, family support, or sporadic part-time employment to sustain their families. They have more children than they would like, though fewer than conventional wisdom would assert,⁵ because they do not have access to health information or family-planning resources. Our schools and youth programs do not teach about the reproductive process for fear that they will offend some group's moral teachings. Yet our society advertises and profits from uncontrolled sexuality in the media, so we must face the consequences that fall heavily on the uneducated and poor.

During the industrial era poor women lived as members of extended families, sharing chores and child raising, but this type of family is a thing of the past. Today these mothers and children live in isolation from relatives,⁶ a consequence of mobility and social policy, often in enclaves of similar families without intergenerational support. They are usually housed in marginal or decaying areas rife with social problems, affecting the quality of the lives of their family. There has always been great residential mobility among low-income families because of fluctuations of wages or work, relationships with neighbors, issues of personal safety, urban renewal, arson, or accidental fires. Their mobility has become more of a problem in the past decade because of loss of available low-income housing stock and social policies abandoning the earlier national commitment to provide housing for the needy.

Health is another major problem for low-income women; they and their children tend to suffer from lack of early or consistent health care. Though there are public medical programs to cover them, they suffer from congenital and long-standing medical problems, which are often not handled adequately. Underfunded and understaffed public clinics and hospitals are hard pressed to handle emergency and critical cases, let alone health and nutritional education, so preventive medicine programs cannot be high priorities. The ultimate costs are borne not only by low-income mothers and their families but by society as a whole.

Many of their physical problems have origins in stress and diseases related to poor mental health. It is a tribute to the strengths and coping skills of low-income women that they are as healthy as they are, since they face inordinate difficulties in their daily lives. The responsibilities of heading a family are always a source of anxiety, even more so for a very young woman with little preparation for the role. Casual observation, baby-sitting, or being an older sister do not provide sufficient motivation or understanding of the ways in which infants and children should be nurtured. Young mothers need prenatal and infant care along with a supportive environment. There are some experimental programs, but they serve only a select few.⁷

Low-income women should not be consigned to perpetual poverty but should be given opportunities to become productive members of the labor force, enhancing their children's future as well. However, social policy and programs should protect the rights of those women who are not ready to leave their children and who desire to fulfill a traditional role at home. Complex cultural and emotional reasons may motivate a low-income mother to choose not to work, but a society concerned about individual potential should protect the traditional as well as the nontraditional role. To that end the welfare of the children must be assured until the parent can earn an income to cover the basic needs of the family.

Moving into the Economic Mainstream

How can low-income women be moved into the economic mainstream? I think that the problem can be approached in a number of ways, including educational, training, and entrepreneurial activities for young and older women. There will need to be adjustments in social policy and funding along with the necessary flexibility to meet the needs of individuals.

Each woman who is to participate in the economic mobility process should be given a supportive, comprehensive, diagnostic examination. Supportive, because these women are accustomed to being abused by bureaucratic systems and often have little faith in governmental promises. First it is important to determine the status of a woman's health, providing referrals and care if necessary. She should be physically fit before embarking on a venture that, although it promises long-term benefits, will be stressful in the short term. This is the point at which any learning disability with a physical basis should be identified. Counseling and peer support groups can help ease the anxiety and misgivings inherent in any new undertaking. Consistent, not sporadic counseling should be provided by a vocationally oriented professional rather than a psychiatrically oriented adviser since the former would be more rooted in the reality of the workplace and not in the class-biased psychological social work orientation.

Another important aspect of the diagnosis is the assessment of a woman's level of literacy and academic skills along with occupational and career aptitude evaluation. It will be important to conduct interviews to reveal the kind of school and work experiences the woman has had and how they affect her dreams of the future; the interview can help prepare the woman for the next stage in the process.

Women who lack sufficient literacy to move directly into an educational or job training program should be placed in an adult literacy program, either with other women in the program or in their local community.⁸ Government and students must recognize that learning to read will not happen overnight, so there must be allowances of time, something not often considered in economic programs. Adults who are highly motivated and see a connection between literacy and their future tend to learn rapidly, but it is important to use a combination of methods that recognize the students' various learning styles. Provisions will have to be made for combined literacy and English-as-a-second-language classes for women who are not native English speakers.

The educational programs should be scheduled year round so that students will be able to move at a pace that provides continual feedback and produces a portfolio of achievement. A transcribed record should be kept by each student so that she has tangible proof of her successes and can take it with her as she progresses. It should include assessments from instructors and counselors. When she has achieved a level of literacy competency that allows her to progress to another level, she should be moved up quickly, probably to a GED class through which she can obtain a high school equivalency certificate. Again, there are different methods for achieving this goal, and the particular method should be appropriate for the woman. The government must continue to support her through this stage. Once she earns a high school certificate, she will be more employable and ready for more complex educational preparation.

At this point the woman should be able to choose the length of time she can devote to a training or educational program, depending on financial or family circumstances. It is important to remember that the goal is to move low-income women from dependency to economic independence, and this cannot be done overnight. The long-term societal bene-

fits will accrue from educational and training programs to prepare the woman for employment beyond entry level and to advance in the labor market. This requires longer training periods than the usual six to twelve months specified in many government programs. It will be important to fashion training programs based on the learning pace of the individual trainee and to sustain the counseling component as she moves through the program. We should recognize that we are dealing with fragile egos, and that it is difficult to reconstruct learning and social skills after years of destruction. For this reason it is important to have consistent counseling rather than intermittent advisers attached to a particular agency or program. A counselor's emphasis should be on a woman's goals and the ways in which she can achieve them rather than her emotional state. Many programs designed for poor people devote too much time and energy to their psyches rather than the reality of their lives.

Redefining Goals

Adults redefine their goals, frames of reference, self-concepts, and criteria for evaluating change as they engage in self-motivated learning activities.¹⁰ This process, which should occur during the educational/training period, will have to continue as the trainees move to new academic and occupational levels, so it is important to have someone to prop them up and enhance the experience. Anyone who exhibits abnormal behavior or mental illness or appears to be disturbed should be referred to an appropriate agency for assistance and not kept in the program.

A branching structure would allow a woman to enroll in a career program at a community college or public vocational school, combining occupational skill training with relevant academic subjects. She should be encouraged to accept work assignments on the campus and internships in the larger community; this would give her experience and self-confidence and expand her awareness of the requirements of the workplace. The academic courses should provide a basis for further study, for a degree rather than a certificate, and transfer at a later date to a baccalaureate institution. She should be encouraged to develop a plan of study that allows her to work part time and study full time, or vice versa, and set goals and timetables. There will have to be close communication between a trainee's counselor and the college or vocational school staff, so that the woman is given individualized attention and assistance throughout the process. She will need help in making the transition from passive observer to active participant and learner, to understand that her vocational goals need to be flexible as she prepares for changes in her life and work. Since many students and employees become discouraged in the first few weeks of a new experience, contact with a counselor will be extremely important, to prevent dropping out.

Flexibility: An Important Component

Programs should be structured to allow women to move back and forth between work and formal educational programs, whether in a vocational school, community college, or four-year college, part time or full time. Too many of our efforts to make low-income people independent are inflexible, with rigid bureaucratic separations between the public agencies providing program and fiscal support. Often there is a vested interest in keeping low-income people dependent so that assumptions about their abilities are justified as are the agency programs.

An individualized rather than a mass approach would be beneficial, since the low-income low achiever has had little individualized positive attention in her educational life. The portfolio/transcript she develops and the continuing relationship with a counselor will help overcome some of the disabling effects of her prior experiences, because she will have tangible proof of her academic accomplishments and someone whom she can trust to interpret the increasingly complex requirements and rewards. The counselor will be the bridge between the trainee, educational institutions, and employers by continually interpreting, translating, encouraging, and mediating.

Academic and occupational studies must be combined with work experience, whether co-op, internships, or work-study, since the low-income trainee needs to be socialized to the expectations and behaviors of employment. She will need coaching to give her the confidence necessary to propel her forward. Work experience on campus, in community agencies, and in private businesses can give her a chance to observe others at work as colleagues and to begin to understand how her studies relate to work and her future ambitions. A salary or stipend is an important part of financing her education, providing living costs as a supplement to the allotment she receives to support her family; she should not be forced to choose between shoes for her children and books for her classes or bus fare to her job. This is another way in which a counselor can act as mediator between agencies and ensure that the trainee is not punished for attempting to improve her economic condition.

The Man in Her Life

An individualized program that isolates a woman from her family and neighbors or the man who is part of her life will not succeed. Many studies and programs for poor women do not work because they assume that these women live in a totally female environment with no male interaction other than nocturnal visits. There are many men around them, some of whom are struggling on subsistence wages, some of whom are in and out of institutions, some of whom are involved in illegal activities, and some of whom are dependent because of physical or mental disabilities or age. These men are important as fathers, husbands, lovers, and relatives and have opinions that matter to the women. The men are often threatened by programs that appear to be designed to dislodge them and their relationships to the women. Their support is necessary and concomitant training programs need to be developed for them, providing opportunities for economic betterment for the entire family and neighborhood. If a man does not understand what is happening to the woman, he will often sabotage her efforts and may resort to threats and physical violence to prevent her from changing her lifestyle. If no attempts are made to mollify these low-income men, it will be infinitely more difficult for the women to succeed in any educational training program and to sustain their gains.

Child Care: Necessary for Success

Even more important than gaining the support of their men is the absolute necessity for these women to have child-care options available so they can participate in the programs described. The costs of child care must be borne by a sponsoring agency and the quality of the care must assure that the educational and physical needs of the children are met. The costs should not have to come from a mother's stipend or allotment, since most mothers would be unable to afford them. The options should be family day care, neighborhood,

college, or workplace centers, extended day care for school-age children. There should also be provisions for care for sick children so that a mother is not precluded from participation because of a child's illness.

Retraining and the Older Woman

Programs must be flexible enough to be available to the working poor — low-income women who seek retraining because of dislocations in the employment market or a need to upgrade their skills. Many of the current programs have short-term numerical goals and few provisions for creating career ladders. As a result, training is given in fits and starts as crises develop and must be met. The retraining aspects are of particular importance to older women, who, freed of family responsibilities, are ready for meaningful, well-paying jobs. As the average age of the population increases,¹¹ we should pay more attention to older women and develop ways to move them from the lowest rungs of the career ladder.

Entrepreneurship and Small Businesses

Training and work experiences should not focus solely on the public or nonprofit or corporate sector but include introductions to entrepreneurship and small businesses. Since the bulk of the work force is employed in small businesses, it is important to inform low-income women of the possibilities and risks involved. Often they are intrigued, because they are aware of certain unmet commercial needs in their own neighborhoods or have secret dreams of making or marketing a particular type of product. They should be encouraged to assess those dreams with self-employed service providers, small-business owners, and staff of state and federal small-business agencies and perhaps be given an appropriate internship. Several women might constitute a cooperative or team to provide a service (telemarketing, data entry, child care, etc.), but would need appropriate training and business advice to get started and prosper.

An old American ideal is to be one's own boss, but we often neglect it when we develop employment and training programs. Two decades ago there was a considerable movement to provide career ladders and programs for the poor and the working poor,¹² but job creation was limited to education and human service fields. This does not work in an economy that cannot expand public service because of taxing restraints and reluctance to add employees to the public rolls, so the private sector is the most logical source of employment.

Mentoring

In addition to the continuing presence of an educational/vocational counselor, a trainee will need mentors in both the educational institution and workplace. The mentor could be a staff member or student at the school or college who understands the way the institution works and how success is achieved. The relationship could be formal or informal, depending on the setting, but would probably be most successful if unencumbered by rules, regulations, or structure. The ideal mentor would be a woman whose background and experiences are similar to those of the trainee, for whom she could serve as a role model and provide further reinforcement.

The mentors could lessen the load of the counselor by providing an immediate description of accepted behavior within a group and the mores of the group. A mentor, through her sponsorship, can facilitate a newcomer's acceptance into a group. Such assistance is

vital to low-income women who were not socialized into a school structure and need encouragement from many people to break out of old habits.

Successful Program Implementation

What would it take to implement such a program? The overriding ingredient must be a public will to succeed, following the old maxim “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” That “will” should be made a permanent public policy, not an ephemeral sop designed to last until the next election or through an official’s term of office.

There has to be a concerned constituency before there can be public policy, and poor people are not usually considered an important constituency. Therefore a coalition needs to develop a plan to convince both the electorate and the elected. The plan should indicate the cost-effectiveness of proposed changes vis-à-vis the current costs of welfare programs for the poor. Some of the costs can be covered under the Family Security Act of 1988, which allows welfare recipients to undertake college studies without losing benefits. The proponents will have to offer persuasive arguments in response to the self-interest of the electorate in order to gain adherents.

The major public policy change should be to treat trainees in their entirety rather than segmenting their needs and corrective approaches to their problems. This will mean that only one agency will be responsible for those involved in the effort and only that agency will select the participants and coordinate the funding and services. The counselor assigned to a trainee will be on the staff of the agency, and her commitment will be to follow the trainee until she has completed her training/education and three months of paid full-time employment. This is a longer period of time than is allowed under most current programs, but it will be based on an obligation to an individual rather than an undifferentiated group of poor people. The agency will coordinate education/training tuitions, housing, child care, health care, part-time employment/internships, and financial support for those women enrolled in the program. It will provide a model for affecting the poverty cycle by its coordinating and advocacy role.

The Role of Postsecondary Education Institutions

Postsecondary education institutions, particularly public vocational schools and community colleges, have a special role to play. These organizations will have to correct the problems created by the public schools and provide the necessary new skills for the women to have productive work lives. The vocational schools and community colleges will have to develop methods by which poor women can be admitted throughout the year and be enrolled in learning activities that prepare them for regular college classroom participation. The associate and baccalaureate degree institutions, private and public, will need to agree on curriculum requirements that will provide articulation and real possibilities for degree attainment. Course requirements for each major included in the agreement will have to be published and disseminated. Many private colleges and a few public institutions have already taken steps to implement such a program, but it needs to be more widespread and have assured funding. This would be the case if the proposed generic approach were taken, because tuition costs would be based on individual student/trainee courses rather than on a fixed amount for a type of program.

The public institutions will need to develop the type of flexible approach similar to that of their counterparts in the private sector, which should not be too difficult when a college

is dealing with an individual rather than a group coming in under rigid guidelines. Colleges and universities must not develop shifting standards that will ultimately penalize the poor who are capable of learning and achieving along with the middle-class students. The poor must have an academic foundation that provides them with the basic understanding to move through a college curriculum with success, which will not happen if they are given a weak substitute and exit without the preparation needed to effectively enter the new technological labor force. The institutions should not only provide the tools for the students' current activities but give them a basis for understanding the past, preparing them for continual learning as a condition of life.

The agency responsible for the trainees should have a plan for public information, recognizing the tremendous value in telling the general community and the participants themselves of the program as it progresses. The agency should seek the support of the media, since little attention or respect is given to publicly funded activities designed to improve the economic conditions of the poor. The potential for success and becoming a model for the future is inherent in every woman enrolled, and it is important to tell the story so that the rippling effect will be felt throughout institutions and neighborhoods. The media, particularly the visual ones, can provide positive reinforcement for the participants, and the material can be used frequently to acquaint the public with the program.

The Challenge of the Future

If we are to create a break in the circle of poverty, it will require the will, a community of consensus, creative thinking, and abilities to succeed. Though the financial burden of support for training has to be public, there must be an underpinning of support from the corporate sector for internships, advisory assistance, and job placement. The small-business sector will also need to be a partner, though it is more difficult to reach small businesses, but they need employees too. They can provide not only employment opportunities but examples and impetus for the entrepreneurial impulse. Voluntary organizations, too, can be enlisted to provide informal and recreational activities for the women and their families, as well as any services that meet special needs of the group.

If we are to meet the challenge of the future, competition from other countries, integrating a diverse work force into society as a whole, and providing an educated work force prepared to cope with a knowledge-based technological economy, we will have to utilize our creative talents and abilities, not only for poor women, but for all of us. 🐼

Notes

1. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1988*, Table 202.
2. *Ibid.*, Table 45.
3. *Ibid.*, Table 626.
4. Gwendolyn Cartledge and JoAnne F. Milburn, "The Case for Teaching Social Skills in the Classroom: A Review," *Review of Educational Research* 1,1 (Winter 1978): 133–156.
5. Mark Rank, "Fertility among Women on Welfare: Incidence and Determinants," *American Sociological Review* 54, 2 (April 1989).
6. *Statistical Abstract, 1988*, Tables 59, 60, 62.

7. National Alliance of Business, Inc., *Women in Poverty: Training for Independence* (Washington, D.C., 1988).
8. Wendy Luttrell, "Working-class Women's Ways of Knowing: Effects of Gender, Race and Class," *Sociology of Education* 62, 1 (January 1989).
9. Paula Hirschhoff, *Wider Opportunities: Combining Literacy and Employment Training for Women* (Washington, D.C.: Wider Opportunities for Women, 1988).
10. Jack Mezirow, *Education for Perspective Transformation: Women's Re-entry Programs in Community Colleges* (New York: Center for Adult Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1978).
11. *Statistical Abstract, 1988*, Table 17.
12. Frank Riessman, *Strategies Against Poverty* (New York: Random House, 1969).