

The War Against Black Women

by Dr. Manning Marable

Among the leading fighters in the struggle for Afro-American liberation have always been black women. The tradition of militant activist black women runs deeply throughout the entire black experience — from Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth in the nineteenth century to Ida Wells Barnett, Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, Barbara Sizemore, Willie Rae Reid in the twentieth century. This is no historical accident.

However, it is no secret that for many years sexism has been a problem within the freedom movement. There have been too many instances of brothers who have underestimated the need to struggle against the special oppression of black women. There have been too few instances where black men have attempted to be as honest and critical in their relationships with sisters as they have endeavored to be with their white oppressors. Too many black men have been silent partners in the war against black women.

Black women who live alone or who are the sole parent figure within their families are often the victims of poverty and unemployment. Statistics from the March, 1980 report of the Bureau of the Census reveal a pervasive pattern of exploitation.

There are two million, four hundred and thirty thousand black families or households where a husband is not present. One million, one hundred and ninety-five thousand of these families are below the poverty level established by the federal government, a percentage (49.2) that is slightly higher than that of Hispanics (forty-nine percent) and much higher than that of whites (30.1 percent). Black families are larger than white or Hispanic families. The mean-size of the black family with a female head was 3.64 persons; for those families below the poverty line, the mean figure was 3.93 persons. This contrasts with white family means of 2.86 persons and 3.22 persons, respectively.

Black families headed by women without a male present also tend to be somewhat larger than those of white or Hispanic women. Here the statistics reveal what our experience with the cruel and harsh realities of poverty tells us — that the more children black families led by women have, the greater the likelihood that the family will be poor. For example, the census reported that there were six hundred and thirty-three thousand black families headed solely by women that had three persons. Of this number, two hundred and ninety-three thousand, or 46.2 percent, were below the poverty line. Two hundred and forty-four thousand black families with women heads had five persons in the household. Of this group one hundred and fifty-two thousand, or 62.5 percent, were impoverished. For black families with women household heads having seven or more persons in the home, a staggering 28.6 percent (one hundred and thirty-four thousand families) were below the poverty line.

Poverty is often a product of poor schools and/or the lack of education. Three hundred and thirty-three thousand black female family heads have less than an eighth grade education. Of this group, one hundred and seventy-three thousand, or 52.1 percent, live below the poverty line. Of the one hundred and forty-four thousand women with an educational level of grade eight, ninety-six thousand, or 66.9 percent, live below the poverty level.

Yet due to the duality of the burden of race and class, black women who do excel in education are far more frequently without work than their white or Hispanic counterparts. Three hundred and fifty-eight thousand black female householders have attended one year or more of college. Of this number, ninety-six thousand, or 26.7 percent, are below the poverty line. This percentage exceeds that for Hispanics (nineteen percent) and for whites (10.7 percent).

Millions of black and brown women were pressured into the marketplace to accept low paying and unrewarding jobs in order to provide for their families. But work in itself is no guarantee against poverty. One hundred and forty-eight thousand black female householders worked in managerial or professional jobs in 1979. Of this group twenty thousand women, or 13.8 percent, still were below the poverty level. Again, this percentage was higher than that for Hispanic professional women (ten percent) and for whites (6.8 percent). Out of four hundred and thirty thousand black women household heads who worked in sales or clerical positions, one hundred and six thousand, or 24.6 percent, were below the poverty line. Two hundred and nineteen thousand black women working in private households or as service workers were classified below the poverty level. Three fourths of all black women farm workers were below the



poverty level. The total percentage of black female family heads who held full-time employment and who were below the poverty level (33.2 percent) was higher than the figures for Hispanic (26.3 percent) and white women (18.9 percent).

The largest categories of black females living in poverty are, as to be expected, the young and the elderly. More black females than males (34.1 percent vs. 27.2 percent) live in poverty. One million, six hundred and forty-six thousand black females below the age of sixteen years are poor, approximately forty-one percent of the total number of black females within this age group (four million, twelve thousand). The next age groups that have significant numbers of black women in poverty are between ages sixteen to twenty-one (six hundred and thirty-three thousand females, 36.9 percent of the total age group) and over age sixty-five (four hundred and eighty-nine thousand females, 41.7 percent of the total age group). Once more, black females across the board are more likely to be poor than women of other ethnic groups. For example, among white females below the age of sixteen, only 12.2 percent live in poverty. Between the ages sixteen to twenty-one years, 10.5 percent are poor; over age sixty-five, 15.8 percent are poor. Hispanic women are far more likely than whites to be poor at every age level, but without exception are significantly better off than black women.

Not surprisingly, black families with female householders are also generally deeply in debt. For black families led by females below the poverty line, two hundred and thirteen thousand families have an annual income deficit between one to nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand dollars. Two hundred and twenty-five thousand have annual fiscal deficits between one to two thousands dollars; two hundred and thirty-five thousand families require between two to three thousand dollars. One hundred and ninety-seven thousand black families headed by females with no husband present sustain annual income shortfalls of five thousand dollars and more. Black families in this group have a mean income deficit that exceeds three thousand dollars annually, again exceeding the deficits for Hispanic families (two thousand, seven hundred and thirty-two dollars) and for whites (two thousand, six hundred and ninety-seven dollars). Buried beneath a mountain of bills, it is small wonder that poor black women are unable to transcend their impoverishment.

The oppression of black women workers can be illustrated in other ways, beyond the limitations of the poverty line. For example, the median income of a black family with both husband and wife in the work force is twenty-three thousand, nine hundred and fifty-seven dollars. For black married couples with only the husband in the work force, the median income is seventeen thousand, four hundred and seventy-seven dollars. For black female householders where no husband or male is present in the home, the median family income is only eleven thousand, five hundred and eighteen dollars. This figure is lower than that for white female household heads (fifteen thousand, four hundred and twenty-one dollars) and for Hispanic women (thirteen thousand, three hundred and thirty dollars). The median income for black females over the age of fourteen, who work full time, regardless of marital status,

is nine thousand, seven hundred and ninety-three dollars. In the southern states, the income figure is only eight thousand, four hundred and seventy-three dollars.

There has been a great deal of rhetoric within black politics about the impoverishment of the black male at the expense of the black female. Supposedly, black women took jobs away from black men because they were "less threatening" to the system of white male domination. This line of argument suggested that black women, more than males, were the chief beneficiaries of affirmative action programs and administrative posts within the private sector. When one studies the facts, however, one derives a radically different picture.

First, it is important to isolate the sectors of black society who are in the upper income levels. According to 1979 census statistics, there were nine million, two hundred and ninety-seven thousand white families heads or householders who earned thirty-five thousand dollars or more annually. In sharp contrast, only three hundred and seventy-five thousand black family heads made thirty-five thousand dollars or more. That group amounts to less than five percent of all black family households (.0046 percent). Sixty-one thousand black family households earned more than fifty thousand dollars annually, less than three-fourths of one percent (.00073) of all black family households. Only fourteen thousand black families earned over seventy-five thousand dollars annually.

Within these upper income groups, black women are severely under represented, to say the least. Four thousand black men and five hundred and forty-eight thousand white men earned at least seventy-five thousand dollars in 1979. Less than five hundred black women earned that figure. Fourteen thousand black men earned fifty thousand to seventy-five thousand dollars. Only two thousand black women were in this category. Forty-six thousand black men received thirty-five thousand to fifty thousand dollars income. Only six thousand black women earned salaries in this range. Sixty-eight thousand black males received thirty thousand to thirty-five thousand dollars in 1979. About eight thousand black women had this income. In brief, the illusion that black women are achieving at the expense of black men is not only false, it is a complete reversal of the oppressive conditions for black women at every level of the economy.

President Reagan's proposals for food stamps would have a devastating impact upon poor black women. To understand this fully, however, we must briefly review the history of the program, what it does, who it helps, and why it may be destroyed.

The food stamp program was enacted into law almost twenty years ago and was designed primarily to use up surplus farm products. There were only four hundred and twenty-five thousand people enrolled in the program in 1964, at a cost of thirty million dollars annually. As late as 1969, only two and nine-tenths million persons were receiving food stamps. It was during the Nixon and Ford administrations, ironically, that the food stamps program began to grow rapidly. By 1980, there were over twenty-two million Americans on food stamps.

We hear a lot of criticism about food stamp recipients. Ronald Reagan, Jesse Helms and other rightwing politicians tell white Americans that the program benefits students, the lazy and professional rip-off artists. The realities behind the reactionary rhetoric are somewhat different.

The average food stamp family has an annual income of three thousand, nine hundred dollars. About ninety percent of all food stamp recipients are below the poverty line, which for a family of four is seven thousand, four hundred and fifty dollars per year. Over half have no tangible assets. Fifty-four percent, or over eleven and one-half million recipients of food stamps are children. Almost eighty percent are unable to work because of age, disabilities, or other related reasons. Only fourteen percent are adults who are able-bodied and are able to work. Less than one percent are college or graduate students.

The Reagan Administration's budget includes welfare cuts for pregnant women. According to Department of Health and Human Services, the legislation proposes that states not give welfare to any pregnant women with no other children, except in the last three months of pregnancy. Thirty-four states are currently making such payments. Here again, we see that the Reagan budget's assault takes a more aggressive posture against the material interests of women, and particularly against black women.

The war against black women continues.

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