



- A publication of Mennonite Central Committee
- March–April 2000
- Volume XXXII
- No. 2

WOMEN AND PUBLIC POLICY

Bread and Roses

BY BETH GRAYBILL

Beth Graybill directs the Women's Concerns desk for MCC U.S.

Households headed by women are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as two-parent households.

International Women's Day—celebrated March 12—is associated in the United States with New York City's female textile workers who marched in 1911 for “bread and roses.” These women factory workers wanted adequate pay and safe working conditions (bread), but they also wanted respect and empowerment (roses). The occasion of the first International Women's Day of the new millennium marks a fitting time to consider the situation of women worldwide.

First and foremost, women and their children disproportionately live in poverty, a global phenomenon that the United Nations refers to as the “feminization of poverty.” In the United States, households headed by women are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as two-parent households. The United Nations describes women as the “overwhelming majority” of the over 1 billion people living in abject poverty around the world. For this reason, policy issues like adequate U.S. public assistance programs and Third-World debt relief are of crucial importance for women.

Working women in the paid labor force in industrialized nations face a wage gap, barriers to promotion, and the high cost of quality day care. Other problems include the comparatively low status and pay of traditionally female jobs in which the majority

of women work—such as secretarial work, house-cleaning, food service, and childcare. Women along the Mexican border and in parts of Latin America and Asia often find work in abusive factory sweatshops, assembling goods for export markets.

A problem for women in developing nations is often sheer exhaustion from the effects of working a “double day,” performing household labor as well as subsistence agriculture and/or paid labor, such as selling items in the market. Women's lower literacy and educational levels due to son preference further disadvantage women looking for paid employment.

Women's low status worldwide leads to poor health. Women and girls are fed last and least, and receive less health care. The United Nations has identified unsafe abortions and female genital mutilation as major health risks to women worldwide. Women's reproductive health care is often inadequate. But the most critical health problem facing women worldwide is AIDS. Among new cases, women are twice as likely to be infected as men. In one decade, AIDS has become a leading cause of death among poor women throughout the world.

Women face a variety of human rights violations worldwide: female infanticide in China; “dowry deaths” in India (dowry-related murders or suicides of poor women in abusive marriages); sexual trafficking of women in Thailand and other countries. Many thousands of women caught up in

IN THIS MEMO

Jaded Justice	2
Women and the Debt	3
Capital Quotes	3
Displaced Woman	4
Female Inmates	5
Burma's Housewives	6
Women of Color	7
Sound the Trumpet	8

Jaded Justice

Martha's* desperate wails pierced the midnight stillness as she pounded on our front door. We glanced out the window. Yellow blazes lit the Mississippi night sky. Martha's estranged husband had returned and set the house on fire—with Martha inside. Fortunately, she had awakened in time to escape. But not a minute too soon. Her house sustained major damage.

I accompanied Martha to the police station the next morning. It quickly became obvious that the police had no plans to mount a serious investigation. Martha's husband worked for a prominent business leader. And, even though he had threatened Martha, no one had actually seen him throw the gas-filled bottle and match into her house.

The screams at our front door were replayed a year later. This time another neighbor. This time it was rape, not arson. Two men had broken into Kathy's* home just after she fell asleep. In spite of her detailed report and full cooperation with police, no one was ever arrested or charged with the crime.

I soon learned that Martha and Kathy's stories are all too familiar. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than 1.5 million women in the United States are victims of violent crime each year. More than two-thirds of those crimes are committed by an *intimate* (spouse, ex-spouse, boyfriend), a *relative* (parent, sibling, in-law) or an *acquaintance*. Violence against women cuts across racial, ethnic and economic groups.

*names have been changed

Women are ten times more likely than men to be the victims of a violent crime committed by an intimate. Yet police are more likely to take a formal report if the offender is a stranger, not a family member. And while domestic violence is the leading cause of injury for women in America ages 15 to 44, only one in ten accused offenders in family violence cases are ever prosecuted.

Violence against women is as old as the Bible. Shechem, son of a stately leader, raped Dinah, daughter of Leah and Jacob (Genesis 34). Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, daughter of Maacah and David (II Samuel 13). Even then, the justice system failed to serve the victims of hideous and violent crime. There is no record that either Jacob or David took any action to bring justice—even though David was the king. On the other hand, Dinah and Tamar's brothers went to the other extreme, violently killing the perpetrators.

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed "The Violence Against Women Act" (VAWA). The bill authorized \$1.6 billion over six years for efforts to prevent violence against women, increase services to victims, and strengthen education, enforcement and prosecution efforts. VAWA also created the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

But funding for VAWA has been nearly depleted. A number of bills introduced in 1999 would re-authorize and expand VAWA by increasing funding for prevention, education and victim assistance programs (see Sound the Trumpet, page 8).

Something is seriously wrong when a nation spends more on one B-2 bomber (\$2 billion per plane) than it invests over six years to address the epidemic of violence against women. VAWA cannot restore the sense of loss and violation many women experience, but it begins to unmask a justice system that has been jaded far too long in responding to violence against women. ■

Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury for women in America, ages 15 to 44.

WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

Staff: J. Daryl Byler (Editorial Director), Rachele Schlachach (Managing Editor), Martin Shupack (Senior Associate Editor), David Whettstone.

To contact the MCC U.S. Washington Office, please see our address on the back page. See our weekly commentary at www.thirdway.com

WASHINGTON MEMO (USPS 130-310) is published bi-monthly by Mennonite Central Committee, Akron, PA. Periodical postage paid at Akron, PA. This issue went to press February 21, 2000.

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE: Washington Memo subscription rates are \$10 for one year; \$18 for two years. Send request and check to MCC, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500. For address changes, send your old address with your new address to MCC. Allow 2-4 weeks for address change.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to MCC, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501.

Women and the Debt

BY MARTIN SHUPACK

The Jubilee 2000 campaign has drawn attention to the crushing burden of international debt on the world's poorest countries. Women suffer disproportionately from this debt.

Poor governments use scarce financial resources to make unending interest payments on old debts. This means less money for health care, education, food subsidies and other services. Furthermore, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed on indebted countries by the International Monetary Fund have required cuts in government spending and other economic policy changes detrimental to women.

Many women are eating less in order to feed their children. Educational opportunities for children in general have decreased—for girls even more than boys, because education for girls is considered less important. In Africa more women are dying during pregnancy and childbirth, while public spending on health care has fallen.

SAP-imposed user fees for health services burden women in several ways. A Ugandan woman explains that “the charge may be [about 20 U.S. cents], but it is still too high for poor women.” Women are less likely to go to the doctor or purchase medicine for themselves. In the face of serious family illness, women must sacrifice household security by selling off seed stocks or livestock in order to pay for medicines or clinic visits.

In many poor countries women are expected to make up for the loss of government services through extra family work, such as walking long distances for clean water. Often women must also take on additional income-generating activities.

But they still cannot earn enough to meet basic needs. In Africa women produce over 75 percent of the food. SAP policies have shifted this labor into export crop production, lowering local food production and raising hunger rates. In Kenya, for example, women report planting tobacco up to the edge of their houses, but not making enough from its sale to feed their families.

Women have been active campaigners for debt relief throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America. They are calling for open and transparent processes, with wide citizen participation and gender analysis. They are actively organizing to ensure that debt relief genuinely promotes poverty reduction. Women's organizations are also working to increase investment in health and education. ■

CAPITAL QUOTES

“In a world where over a billion people live on less than a dollar a day, we also have got to do our part . . . to reduce the debts of the poorest countries. . . . That's what the Pope and other religious leaders have urged us to do. And last year, Congress made a down payment on America's share. I thank you for what you did, and ask you to stay the course.”

—U.S. President Bill Clinton, in his State of the Union address to Congress

“We strangely find ourselves having to explain why it is a bad thing if multinational corporations control our elections, and why it is a bad thing if our elected leaders no longer represent the interests of the people.”

—Doris “Granny D” Haddock, 90, who is walking cross-country to support campaign finance reform.

“I remind you to keep one thing in mind: The test succeeded. The target was hit.”

—Pentagon spokesman, downplaying critics' claims that a missile-defense interceptor likely hit its target out of sheer luck. The test was hailed as a victory in a series of unsuccessful and costly attempts. Days afterward, another test failed.

Pontruddle



BY BONNIE KLASSEN

Bonnie Klassen works with JustaPaz, the peace and reconciliation agency of the Mennonite Church in Columbia. In this article, she reflects the perspective of a Colombian woman toward the United States.

In the morning I cook meat for the owner's dog. At the end of the day I feed rice to my children.

THE WAR IN COLOMBIA

More than 1.5 million Colombians have been displaced by civil war over the last ten years.

Eighty percent of those displaced are women and children.

As this issue of the *Memo* goes to print, the U.S. Congress is preparing to send over \$1 billion more in military aid to Colombia.

Displaced Woman

I am a displaced woman—displaced from my land by your bullets. For many years we lived in tranquility, growing yucca and potatoes—fulfilling the Colombian dream. When the armed groups began to storm through our land, everything changed.

I remember well one piercing hot afternoon when three military soldiers arrived. They crashed down the door and aimed their machine guns at me. My heart thudded as I embraced a baby on each hip. My husband had been “disappeared” several months earlier, leaving me to face this menace alone.

In a voice that shocked even myself, I challenged them: “Will you really dare to kill me in front of three babies? Do you not have mothers yourselves?” After slapping my face and stealing anything of value from the house, they suddenly left.

My sigh of relief lasted only a moment. Soon the helicopters arrived to force the whole town out. When bombs fall from the sky, we have no opportunity to touch the conscience of the attackers. I do not know who the gun-shooters were, or why they came. The only explanation came written on the bottom of the helicopter—MADE IN THE USA.

So I fled for the city with my three sons. What choice did we have? You have control of my land, but I am still going to struggle to save our lives. We are living in a rat-invested patio on the outskirts of a forgotten neighborhood, with 300 families crowded nearby.

Every night my babies wake up screaming in terror. As I try to soothe them I pray that others will hear their cry for life. My oldest son refuses to eat. I look at his skeleton body and remember reading about the world-changing results of Gandhi's hunger strikes. Somehow I doubt that anyone will notice my emaciated son.

I am a displaced woman—displaced from the global economy by your multinational companies. Before we grew our food on a small farm, and sold the produce to markets in town. Now these same markets are filled with products that say MADE IN THE USA. We could no longer support ourselves in the face of such competition, especially once the anti-drug planes started to spray our crops. The poison kills all the plants, not just coca. Some of our neighbors left for the coca-producing lands deeper in the jungle. They are processing coca leaves using chemicals that say MADE IN THE USA.

As for myself, I now work as a maid for a wealthy family in the city, earning \$70 a month. First thing in the morning I cook succulent meat for the owner's dog. At the end of the day I feed only rice or potatoes to my children. When I listen to the two cry themselves to sleep at night, I wonder how to create a different future.

I am a displaced woman—displaced from possibilities, justice and the power-holders' memories. However, you cannot displace me from my laughter, my hope nor my incessant desire to struggle on. You cannot displace me from my dignity. I will continue to plant flowers in front of my home and give voice to the dreams that resurrect out of my pain until you—the global decision-makers—realize that I am not just a pawn to be moved or a statistic in your cost-analysis charts. *I am a woman.* ■

An Important One Percent

BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

About one woman out of every 109 adult women in the United States is involved with the criminal justice system. Since 1980, the number of women in prison has increased at nearly double the rate for men. There are now nearly seven times as many women in state and federal prisons as there were in 1980. Some estimates tally over 146,000 female inmates in state and federal prisons and local jails. This total accounts for about six percent of the total prison population. The majority of female inmates—about two-thirds of those in state prisons and 98 percent of federal prisoners—are incarcerated for non-violent offenses.

Drug offenses contribute to nearly half of the increase in the female prison population. Women who are caught on the fringes of America's war on drugs are heavily impacted by mandatory minimum sentencing. Given their low-level involvement, concerned stakeholders debate whether women are serving "harder" prison time than men who organize, lead or supply drug operations. They have few resources for their defense or plea bargaining.

Virtually in every way, female juvenile offenders are matching the dynamic of their adult counterparts—particularly in background and experience. In 1998, they were 27% of juvenile arrests, continuing to exceed the recent rates for boys.

There have been numerous investigations and accounts of abuse of female inmates verified by the U.S. Department of Justice, the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International USA, and the news media.

Female inmates have been placed in supermaximum security (or "supermax") facilities, often as punishment. Supermaxes have a particularly devastating effect on the health of women. There is much debate as to whether female prisoners' behavior fit the criteria for supermax placement.

States like Delaware and North Carolina are providing some range of family-sensitive care and services addressing the realities of female incarceration. The federal 1994 crime bill included the Family Unity Act, a proposal to finance state construction of correctional housing which would keep children with their primary caregivers. Though the crime bill was enacted, this act has never been funded. Much federal and state attention is still needed to improve women's experience and service with the criminal justice system.

Old Testament admonitions, along with Christ's advocacy regarding women, call us to be mindful and active regarding the treatment and status of women. Advocating for the following actions is one way we can focus on women in the criminal justice system:

- Use more gender-, cultural- and age-specific data at every point in the criminal justice process to improve understanding of female offenders and systemic responses.
- Repeal mandatory sentencing laws and encourage community-based and restorative responses.
- Expand substance abuse treatment both within and outside the criminal justice system.
- Provide resources and programs to address the needs of children of incarcerated parents. ■

Drug offenses contribute to nearly half of the increase in the female prison population.

WOMEN IN PRISON

Approximately 80,000 women in U.S. prisons and jails are mothers of some 200,000 children under 18.

The rate of imprisonment for African American women is more than *eight* times higher and Latinas nearly *four* times higher than that of Euro-American women.

The U.S. female prison population is ten times more than any individual Western European nation and roughly equals the total for that region.

Housewives in Politics

BY RACHELLE SCHLABACH

Women are actively engaged in the struggle for democracy in Burma.

In a statement last year for Women in Burma Day, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi said, “it is no longer possible even for housewives to keep out of politics, because politics has invaded the traditional domain of housewives.” She was referring to the absolute control that military rulers have over life in Burma. The military has governed the country since 1962, despite losing badly in democratic elections in 1990 to the main opposition party.

A long-running civil war has taken a heavy toll on Burma. Nearly one million Burmese, largely ethnic minorities, have been displaced from their homes. Forced out of their communities, women must provide education for their children and often must raise their families alone. Rape is a commonly-used tactic in the war. In addition, extreme poverty and lack of education leads many women to flee to Thailand. They are promised employment or legal status, but find brothels awaiting them instead. The women fear arrest or deportation if they protest their circumstances.

Despite these hurdles, women are actively engaged in the struggle for democracy in Burma. A number of prominent political prisoners and activists are women, as is the opposition leader—Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. The women are calling for increased cooperation within ethnic groups as part of the long-term solution to Burma’s problems. An MCC-supported organization, Burma Issues,

works at the grassroots level to build strong communities that work toward this goal.

Aung San Suu Kyi has also called for international economic sanctions as a way of reducing the military’s power, giving grassroots organizers space in which to work. In 1997, the United States responded to this call, imposing sanctions on Burma that prohibit any new investment by U.S. companies. These sanctions remain in place.

A year earlier, the State of Massachusetts had passed a “selective purchasing law” which was even more stringent than the federal sanctions. Similar laws were passed by Vermont and 22 cities across the United States. The law was eventually struck down on the basis that only the federal government can determine foreign policy. An appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court will be heard in late March, with the decision announced this summer.

The ruling will affect the ability of local and state governments to choose their business partners on moral grounds. Regardless of outcome, the case has brought considerable attention within the United States to the situation in Burma. As such, it is one small part of the struggle for justice by housewives and other committed activists in Burma. ■

Bread and Roses

continued from page 1

violent conflicts experience rape as a war crime, a little-reported aspect of ethnic cleansing. Acts of violence directed at women worldwide include wife beating and other forms of domestic violence, rape (including acquaintance rape), and other forms of sexual abuse and assault. Legislative initiatives to address these issues include pressing for greater implementation by the 189 signatory nations (including the United States) of the United Nations’ “Platform for Action,” developed

during the 1995 Convention to End Discrimination Against Women. In the United States, the Violence Against Women Act is one policy initiative designed to address such problems.

In these and in many other ways, women in the United States and around the world are still struggling for the bread of survival, and also for roses—improved quality of life and an end to attitudes that demean and devalue women. ■

Lifting Women of Color

The Tide That Lifts All Boats

There are many pressing conditions which disproportionately affect women of color: 1) some of the fastest-growing rates of HIV and AIDS infection of any subgroup of the U.S. population, 2) a frightening increase in levels of incarceration, 3) the lack of living-wage jobs with adequate benefits, including affordable health care. While these difficult issues infect the entire society, women of color seem to have contracted an “advanced case” of these problems.

Unfortunately, these stubborn facts about women of color have not often generated productive policy debates about how to address these problems. The U.S. economy is the best it has ever been—for those who own .com companies and already have the necessary capital and know-how to play the market. Unemployment is low—if you don’t mind working for minimum wage and no benefits in the service sector or at a franchise restaurant. There is a budget surplus, but this cannot last indefinitely and there is as yet no consensus about what to do with it. Most Americans do not want to interrupt the bull-market banquet for a consideration of how to improve economic conditions for those who were not invited to the “initial public offering.”

Furthermore, when it comes to people of color, particularly poor women, we witness “compassion fatigue” in the public dialogue: the rich get tax break offers while the poor get welfare-to-work reform at a time when lower-skilled union jobs with benefits—work which was previously available to less-educated, working-class people—has moved to cheaper overseas labor markets. In short, there is a reluctance to consider public policies aimed specifically at raising the prospects of women of color

—who are heads of household in many low-income families, and are thus important members of the social fabric for some of society’s most vulnerable communities.

Given these conditions and the current political climate, we must think strategically and pragmatically. When we examine what factor, besides race, class and gender, links poor women of color to these high-risk indicators, it is often lack of education. There is a correlation between low levels of education, low socio-economic levels and higher rates of HIV and AIDS infection. An astounding percentage of incarcerated persons are functionally illiterate. And in the new high-tech economy, those without knowledge of computers simply do not have access to more secure, high-paying jobs.

So, perhaps what can be proposed is an all-purpose, general education reform for the 21st century—an idea which is actually gathering attention during the 2000 election campaign. Specific goals should be to break the link between real estate taxes and school funding, so that all school districts receive comparable revenues; to build more schools with decreased class size, and to increase teacher training and salaries; and to build more partnerships between schools, community organizations and employers. By prioritizing those communities which presently have the worst schools—something like a “Superfund” environmental clean-up for our educational system—this general policy could have the effect of lifting up women of color, and thus our entire society. ■

IN OTHER’S WORDS

BY JALANE SCHMIDT

Jalane Schmidt, former MCC Washington Office staff member, is currently a doctoral candidate in the Study of Religion at Harvard University.

There is a reluctance to consider public policies aimed specifically at raising the prospects of women of color.

CALENDAR

The Million Mom March (Mothers' Day, May 14th—Washington, D.C.) is calling on Congress to enact gun control legislation. Mothers, grandmothers, and others willing to be "honorary mothers" are invited to join in the march. Contact: (888) 989-MOMS, www.millionmom-march.com.

The Silent March will display 30,000 pairs of empty shoes—equal to the number of gun deaths per year—at the Republican (July 31–Aug. 3, Philadelphia) and Democratic (Aug. 14–17, Los Angeles) Conventions. States will also run local Silent Marches. Contact: (516) 247-9101, www.silentmarch.org.

SOUND THE TRUMPET!

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)	Funding for programs created under the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 will run out October 1, 2000. H.R. 1248 would re-authorize VAWA programs for five more years. A second bill, H.R. 357, would expand VAWA programs—including legal services for battered women and increased funding for rape prevention. Senate bills S.51 and S. 1069 together include most of the provisions found in H.R. 1248. For bill summaries and lists of cosponsors check: www/thomas.loc.gov/	While, in the long run, H.R. 357 is the preferred bill, women's groups say the most critical step is getting the House and Senate to pass language similar to H.R. 1248 by late April, so that funding for 2001 will not be jeopardized.

USEFUL ADDRESSES



MCC U.S. Washington Office
110 Maryland Ave NE
Suite 502
Washington DC 20002
(202) 544-6564
mccwash@mcc.org

Senator _____
United States Senate
Washington, D.C.
20510
(202) 224-3121

Representative _____
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.
20515
(202) 224-3121

President Bill Clinton
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500
(202) 456-1111
president@whitehouse.gov

ADDRESS SERVICE
REQUESTED

21 South 12th Street
PO Box 500
Akron, PA 17501-0500

PERIODICALS
POSTAGE PAID
AT AKRON, PA

