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Victoria L. Banyard

University of New Hampshire, Victoria.banyard@unh.edu

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Welfare Queens or Courageous Survivors? Strengths of Women in Poverty

VICTORIA L. BANYARD

PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY in the United States is staggering and a growing body of social science research clearly documents the negative consequences for the physical and mental health of people struggling to meet their basic needs (e.g. Recker Rayburn, 2007). Yet to most of us these people are just statistics. Without critical analysis of the historical and social factors that contribute to poverty, negative stereotypes and victim blaming arguments flourish—further perpetuating the problem (e.g. Bullock & Lott, 2001). This paper aims to shed light on one of the largest categories of those struggling with poverty: women. It focuses particularly on what these women say about their lives. Their voices are particularly clear about the strengths many women bring to their struggle to overcome the stress of living in poverty. Their stories show their attempts to find another route toward opportunity for themselves and their children. Such strengths, all too often hidden behind stereotypes, as will be discussed below, offer valuable lessons for all of us and a fundamental base of knowledge for policies and programs that aim to support the movement of these women beyond survival to thriving.

Social science research continues to document the persistence of negative images of low-income women. According to a survey in a recent study, college students linked individuals in poverty more often with negative stereotypes such as “uneducated,” “lazy,” or “unpleasant” than those in the middle class, who were more likely characterized as “hardworking” or “intelligent” or “family oriented.” (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001).

Furthermore, those surveyed were likely to attribute the causes of poverty to presumed actions of those living in poverty (lack of effort or substance abuse problems) rather than external or wider societal reasons (e.g. discrimination, lack of opportunities) or chance (e.g. bad luck). These results underscore the notion that as a society we believe these individuals control their destiny entirely and thus, when they wind up in poverty, get what they deserve. Katz (1989) states, “We can think about poor people as ‘them’ or as ‘us.’ For the most part

Americans have talked about ‘them’... poor people usually remain outsiders, strangers to be pitied or despised, helped or punished, ignored or studied, but rarely full citizens, members of a larger community on the same terms as the rest of us” (p.236).

It is important to know that this attitude is not borne out by the research on actual causes of low-income status. There is much more to this status than a woman’s choices and limiting our focus to individual choices or traits restricts our understanding of the problem. Instead, we need to ask questions about the context in which she leads her life. For example: Does a woman have a community rich in resources on which she can depend? What are her social supports? Is she isolated? Is she coping with violence? What opportunities does she have for education? Is there affordable housing in her community? Employment that pays a living wage?

Impoverished women are a diverse group and like any other group, have a wide range of different experiences, stresses and needs. Understanding them brings us to a fuller picture of their lives and also, perhaps, to better means of helping them.

A variety of research highlights problems with affordable housing, health care, and low-wage work (e.g. Lott & Bullock, 2001; Rollins, Saris, & Johnston-Robledo, 2001). Women themselves describe the web of stress they deal with daily:

If you find a place, the landlord, the majority, are not understanding. I’m in a shelter, I need a home now, but I need a deposit for first month’s rent. When you’re on [welfare] and you’re only allowed so much money, that’s next to impossible and you have an allotted time to get out of the [shelter]. That’s stressful, knowing that the clock’s ticking... You’ve worked all your life, and then you’re stuck on welfare, and then your children ask for things. My son needs new shoes, we can’t find his father to get his clothes. He’s got two pairs of pants. I had to take part of my money out of my check to go get him some clothes. In a way, you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t.

The toll this takes is great. As one woman put it, “It seems like every time you try to do something, you’ve always gotta struggle for something else. It gets hard and frustrating at times. You just wonder, are you ever gonna stop having to do this? Are you gonna live a normal life, like most people, instead of just being out there struggling and trying to survive?”

Yet in the face of these obstacles women find ways not only of surviving but finding meaning and hope for the future. They use an array of survival strategies including focusing on and gaining strength from their children and their roles as mothers, patiently enduring what they have little control to change, actively working on each problem they encounter, and building social supports through friends and spiritual communities (Banyard, 1995). The words of women interviewed during my own research exemplify these strategies through their observations on the value of empowerment, social supports, and sheer persistence.

One single mother of children living in a shelter for homeless families speaks of persisting through hard times and roadblocks to stability. “We just, we think of it again and think of another route. You know, like taking another street. You know, it’s not like you’ll hit a highway but you just hit another street, but it won’t be a dead end street.” Another talks about the need for persistence. “It’s not how you deal with ‘em, it’s how you go by it. It’s not easy to deal with, not at all. You get frustrated, and you wanna say this and you wanna say that, but you can’t say it. You gotta keep it all in your head and just be strong the next time around.” Yet another mother describes her drive to succeed. “I know if I keep sitting here and keep being ambitious, keep calling places....It more or less gives me a hope, to let me know that I haven’t failed because I still want to go on. You know, it’s like I run this race, I fall down. I’m not just going to lay there. Even if I lose, I’m going to get up and still try to make it to the finish line.”

These characteristics of patience and persistence as women set clear goals for themselves and work hard to achieve them are but a few of the strengths women draw upon in their daily lives. As women like these speak about their lives, communities are forced to re-examine long-held stereotypes about low-income individuals. Rather than lazy and unmotivated, women can appear strong-willed, hopeful, and active agents in creating change for their families. Such a view of women’s strengths (not just their stresses and challenges though the challenges they face are quite real and must be understood as well) also requires communities to ask new

questions about what women need to reach their goals. A recent qualitative study asked women involved in an advocacy program what was helpful to them (Goodman et al, under review). Women noted the importance of being listened to and respected as collaborators in relationships with the service providers helping them cope with an array of stressors in their lives.

Understanding women’s strengths is also an important starting place for designing effective and meaningful policies and programs in communities to help them. Knowledge gained from a more comprehensive approach to studying women in poverty—the approach exemplified in this paper—can lead to policies that help these women build on their existing abilities, goals and strengths. It shifts the paradigm away from approaching the problem of women in poverty as one of reforming deviant individuals to one of changing communities (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995). For example, if we assume that women in poverty are lazy and unmotivated (common stereotypes), we are likely to design policies that focus exclusively on giving them, as individuals, penalties for not finding a job. If we, on the other hand, assume that many women possess the desire to make a better life for themselves and their families and listen to their stories of how hard it is to feed and house a family on minimum wage or to find affordable child-care, then we design policies which encourage work by supporting a living wage and educational opportunities for low-income workers and increasing accessible, affordable childcare for their children. The causes of poverty ultimately are complex, as are the solutions that are needed. But part of the solution begins by assuming that low-income women themselves have something important to say about the problem and its amelioration.

Indeed, listening to individual stories may facilitate this paradigm change by helping communities better define and build contexts that women can experience as empowering. One participant in a comprehensive advocacy program noted the value of a collaborative advocacy relationship this way. “I recognize that there are structural things that go on in people’s lives that make it so people feel like they have no power In some ways, you have to be able to get those structures to work for you in order to have power over your own life. [Advocacy] ...is definitely gonna help get you there.” Yet another woman, struggling with both poverty and depression, draws on lessons from her life and work with community advocacy to describe the need for communities that take women’s strengths into account:

To be, feel empowered, you have to know that you deserve help, you have to know where, how to ask, who to ask, where to get help, you have to get help that you need, and get your needs met and then you have to be able to come back and help other people too, and because when you live in a community where you're surrounded by other people who are struggling just like you are...and you figure out how to work the system and you have the power to then go show other people down the road....the process of empowerment comes back to the idea of shared power and collective power...you feel like people are actually hearing your voice because it's a collective, it's part of a collective voice.

The challenge as we read these words is to consider how we create communities that build on the clear strengths that women have, to create the conditions for the empowerment they seek. The words of the women we have heard in this paper—women who are a key part of our own communities as neighbors, sisters, and mothers—remind us that they are not the “other”. They are all of us. They have challenges, but also the strength to seize opportunities. Their words force us to ask why negative stereotypes of low income women and families persist and what each of us plans to do to take action for change—to move beyond the stereotypes and on to real solutions to the Poverty and Wealth Divide. One important place to start is engaging in the important academic discussions about research and policy that are part of this Discovery dialogue series. But we must then put the knowledge we gain to use—re-thinking and challenging our own assumptions about women in poverty and finding ways to make our own voices heard in our communities and in wider policy discussions on these issues.

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