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Sara S. McLanahan, Annemette Sørensen, and Dorothy Watson (*Signs* 15, no. 1 [Autumn 1989]: 102-22) have attempted to clear up some of the confusion surrounding the "feminization of poverty" theme that has colored so much of the discussion of poverty over the last decade. Yet they have overlooked a number of factors that must be recognized in a meaningful analysis of apparent changes in the susceptibility to poverty of men and women.

First, like virtually all other commentators who have discussed the feminization of poverty, the authors have failed to consider the implications of a basic property of normal distributions. Specifically, a group that is more susceptible to a condition than another group will make up a higher proportion of each segment of the population that is increasingly more susceptible to the condition. For example, in 1979, female-headed family members made up 28 percent of the population below 125 percent of the poverty line, 32 percent of the population below 100 percent of the poverty line, and 35 percent of the population below 75 percent of the poverty line. Thus, were there to be a general decline in poverty such that all persons previously between the poverty line and 75 percent of the poverty line were raised from poverty, the proportion that female-headed family members make up of the poor would rise. Conversely, in the case of an across-the-board increase in poverty, the proportion female-headed family members make up of the poor would decrease.¹

The underlying phenomenon manifests itself in other mathematical relationships that may also misleadingly suggest a change in the relative well-being of two groups having different income distributions, such as differences between percentage reductions in poverty rates and changes in ratios of poverty rates. Still, whenever there occurs an overall decrease in poverty, the poorer group will tend to have a smaller percentage decrease in its poverty rate than other groups, and the ratio of the poverty rate of the poorer group to that of wealthier groups will increase. In the case of the hypothetical reduction in poverty described above, the poverty rate in

¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of the Population, Detailed Population Characteristics, United States Summary, Section A: United States*, final report PC 80-1-D1-A (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 19), table 304.

female-headed families would fall by 27 percent (from 34.4 percent to 25.2 percent), while the poverty rate for all other persons would fall by 36 percent (from 9.6 percent to 6.1 percent); and the ratio of the poverty rate of persons in female-headed families to that of other persons would increase from 3.6:1 to 4.1:1.

Anyone inclined to believe that such changes reflect a *true* decline in the relative economic well-being of female-headed families should merely consider the effect of the changes on the remainder of the population—persons not in poverty. In the above hypothetical situation, as the poverty rate for female-headed families falls from 34.4 percent to 25.2 percent, the proportion of persons in female-headed families who were not in poverty would rise from 65.6 percent to 74.8 percent, a 14 percent increase. That proportional increase would be several times greater than the 4 percent increase (from 90.4 percent to 93.9 percent) in the proportion of other persons who are not in poverty. Yet it would make no sense to say that female-headed family members disproportionately participated in the movement into the ranks of the nonpoor, just as it would not make sense to say that they did not fairly share in the movement out of the ranks of the poor.

Second, while increases in the ratio of the poverty rates of female-headed family members to that of other persons—or, to use the comparison employed by the authors, the ratio of the poverty rates of adult women to adult men—tended to flow inexorably from declines in poverty between the 1950s and middle 1970s, it is difficult to deny that in recent decades female-headed families also experienced a genuine increase in relative susceptibility to poverty. The principal reason to expect such a change is the growth in the labor force participation rates of married women, making comparisons between female-headed families and other units increasingly comparisons between one- and two-earner families. The authors fail to acknowledge this factor and in fact suggest that increased female labor force participation should be decreasing the relative disadvantage of female-headed families.

Yet, the increasing advantage of the married-couple family (and all persons in it) in consequence of the increase in the labor force participation rates of married women is a factor that cannot be ignored when considering ways of moderating the economic disadvantage of the female-headed family. The authors suggest pay equity policies as one possible approach. It would appear true that pay equity policies—and other approaches to enhancing the earnings of women—would probably decrease slightly the relative economic disadvantage of female family heads who work or who would work once such policies were implemented. Viewing the

matter very roughly, with an increase in average female earnings from 60 percent to 80 percent of average male earnings, the family wage of a female-headed family would rise from 60 percent to 80 percent of the family wage of a married-couple family where only the husband works and would rise from 37.5 percent (i.e., sixty over 160) to 44.4 percent (i.e., eighty over 180) of the family wage of a married-couple family where both husband and wife work.

Even this improvement in the relative well-being of the female-headed family, however, would apply only to situations where the female family head works, as a great majority do. When the focus is not on relative median or mean earnings, but on relative likelihood of being in poverty, one must consider the fact that over 50 percent of poor female family heads do not work,² and, even with substantially enhanced employment opportunities, many still will not find it economically efficient to work given the costs of child care. For women who do not work, the enhancement of opportunities for women who do work (most of whom are married) only increases their relative disadvantage compared with the married-couple family.

Even female family heads who do work will improve their relative economic standing only if the enhancement of opportunities for all women does not cause great numbers of married women to enter the labor force. To the extent that the enhancement of female employment opportunities does cause great numbers of married women to enter the labor force, the net effect of that enhancement on the relative well-being of the female-headed family may well be negative. It may be impossible to determine the degree to which enhanced opportunities for women have increased labor force participation of married women. Yet it must be recognized that what is often loosely described as a dramatic increase in the labor force participation of women in recent decades is principally an increase in the labor force participation of married women.

There are, of course, numerous benefits of that change, including increased economic well-being for married-couple families, increased freedom and power for women within families, and improved economic well-being of female-headed families formed through divorce and widowhood. Moreover, policies that merely assure women equal opportunity in the workplace are compellingly justified in their own right. Still, we should be wary of justifying policies on the basis that they will moderate the relative disadvantage of the female-headed family when there is much reason to believe that they will have the opposite effect.

² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Populations Reports*, ser. P-60, no. 163 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989), table 21.

Third, the authors cite a rise in divorce rates as a factor leading to the increasing ratio of female to male poverty rates. Certainly, by increasing the rates of single parenthood for women, rising divorce rates contribute significantly to the rise in the ratio of female to male poverty rates. Yet single parentage as a result of divorce is of considerably less importance in that regard than single parentage as a consequence of unmarried childbearing. Families of divorced women are certainly a greatly disadvantaged unit; but because divorced mothers tend to be older, better educated, more likely to have work experience at the time of their divorce, and more likely to receive child support than women who bear children out of wedlock, they are much less likely to be poor. In 1987, for example, the poverty rate for divorced female family householders was 25 percent compared with 55.1 percent for never-married female family householders. As a result, although divorced female family householders outnumbered never-married female family householders by 1.7:1, poor never-married female family householders outnumbered poor divorced female family householders by 1.3:1.³ Thus, it makes little sense to focus on divorce while ignoring the issue of births out of wedlock.

Fourth, in the discussion above I have principally compared female-headed family members with other units, because that is the way the feminization of poverty issue is usually analyzed. As a rule the issue has been portrayed in terms of an increase in the proportion of the poor that was made up of female-headed families or households. Even apart from the point on normal distributions mentioned at the outset, there was reason to question the wisdom of focusing on the proportion of the poor made up of persons in female-headed families. That focus confounds the effects of changes in the relative poverty rates of female-headed families with changes in the proportion of the population found in female-headed families. These issues, it would seem, could be better examined separately, particularly since they might require different (even opposing) responses. An obvious way of separately analyzing the former issue would seem to be through the examination of relative poverty rates of female-headed families and other groups (although, to be sure, the nature of normal distributions makes this a difficult undertaking).

³ Ibid., table 8. I have been unable to find comparable census data broken down to reflect presence or absence of children; but Douglas J. Besharov and Alison J. Quin, "Not All Female-headed Families Are Created Equal," *Public Interest*, no. 89 (Fall 1987), 48-56, give 1983 poverty rates of 44 percent for divorced women with children and 69 percent for never-married women with children.

The authors' description of ways in which an increase in the feminization of poverty could result from a variety of phenomena was useful, and their decision to examine changing ratios of poverty rates, rather than the changing composition of the poor, was sensible. Yet, I question whether it was useful to alter the focus from the poverty rates of female-headed families and other units to the poverty rates of adult women and adult men.

Like focusing on the proportion of the poor in female-headed families, focusing on differences in adult poverty rates also confounds two quite different phenomena—changes in the relative poverty of various household units and changes in the proportion of women who are in various household units. While the authors have endeavored to show the influence of marriage, parentage, and living arrangements on changes in the adult female/adult male poverty ratio, their data did not permit a separate appraisal of the changing relative condition of the female family head.

There is a dramatic disparity between the susceptibility to poverty of female family heads and other adult women, particularly those in married-couple families. That dramatic disparity translates into the far more modest disparities between adult men and adult women presented by the authors. The poverty of the woman who heads a family is, in effect, diluted by her inclusion with so many less poverty-prone women. The poverty of women who head families, however, is too significant an issue to be denied individual attention.

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