



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 4
Issue 6 *July*

Article 5

July 1977

The Scarlet "W" Public Welfare as Sexual Stigma for Women

Phyllis J. Day
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Gender and Sexuality Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Day, Phyllis J. (1977) "The Scarlet "W" Public Welfare as Sexual Stigma for Women," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 6 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol4/iss6/5>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



THE SCARLET "W"
PUBLIC WELFARE AS SEXUAL STIGMA FOR WOMEN

Phyllis J. Day
Western Michigan University

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to focus attention on sex role deviance as a major contributive factor in negative attitudes toward women on welfare. Our position is that part of the stigma toward welfare recipients arises from the fact that they are sex role deviants, and that the differential treatment accorded to men and women on welfare has to do with the difference in sex role expectations from which they deviate. Although negative attitudes toward men on welfare are as evident as those toward women, this article sets aside the issue of men on welfare (though cognizant of its importance) to focus on the more numerous group of women on welfare.

The paper is intended to provide a new perspective on welfare and the sex-related aspects of stigma toward women recipients, in which the very fact of a woman seeking public support brands her not only with the taint of laziness but with the taint of sexual immorality.

INTRODUCTION

Robert K. Merton's theories on latent and manifest functions are particularly appropriate to the study of welfare. He says

...action can be planned to accomplish certain goals and yet succeed in achieving quite different results which are unplanned or unacknowledged,

and that

...a social policy or any other action phenomenon may not be the sole method used to achieve a particular end (Bell, 1965; p. iv).

In welfare we have a system which is manifestly a charitable function, established for the protection of the poor as prescribed in the earliest writings about traditions of charity (Weber, 1952). Especially in the provision of support and services for children, in the Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) program, true charity would appear to be the keynote. Not only financial aid but social services are manifestly intended for provision. We may infer, therefore, a society concerned about social as well as financial support for children. However, the extent of this help and the way it is given seem to demonstrate that support is not the program's major goal. The grants are inadequate to meet needs, they are ringed around with eligibility requirements peripheral to needs, and the stigma attached to seeking such help makes it a last resort for most people.

The history of the AFDC program is an interesting counterpoint to its manifest purpose. Among the first recommendations of the Children's Bureau, one of the forerunners of ACD, was that there be a "contract" with the mother to provide a "suitable home" for the child. A suitable home policy, according to Bell, is

...a response to the recurring anxiety that the indiscriminate provision of public aid will encourage parental immorality or irresponsibility and perpetuate homes that are destructive to children (Bell, 1965: 4).

Once established by the Social Security Acts of 1935, federal policy left administration of the AFDC program to states and localities, in the expectation of responsiveness to local needs. This permitted such travesties as the Louisiana fiasco, in which 23,000 people were put off welfare on the basis that, because the mother had illegitimate children, the home was not suitable (Bell 1965: 7). Moreover, social approval of such repressive policies is surely indicated when a governor announces proudly that "8000 illegitimate children were taken off the rolls during my term of office" (Faubus, Arkansas, 1960, from Mandell, 1971: 25).

There is little doubt that provision for support of the poor is one of the lowest priority items in the national budget. However, actual money expenditures for welfare have nearly doubled in the period 1960-1970, and this is a fact that the public and legislators dwell on. It is, nevertheless, the drastic increase in divorces, leading to more AFDC families, rather than a more generous level of support which is the major reason for higher welfare costs. This bears directly on the problem, since the greater numbers of people deviating from the "marriage and family" norm and seeking public assistance exacerbate the stigma of welfare by making the deviance more visible.

Recent legislation has moved all adult categories of welfare (except the residual general assistance category) to the Social Security Administration (January, 1975). In effect, this has served to legitimize the categories moved (Old Age Assistance, Aid to Disabled, Aid to Blind), since the social security program is felt to be "insurance" rather than "charity." Families with dependent children remain under the close scrutiny of state and local authority. If need were the criterion, this dichotomization between "deserving" and "non-deserving" poor would not have seemed necessary, nor would close supervision to insure compliance with certain rules be needed. Obviously welfare serves a latent function tied only lightly to the issue of support.

It is proposed here that one latent function served by welfare, and particularly by the AFDC program, is the maintenance of sex role norms basic to our society. This latent function exists for both men and women. However, economic factors and the relative powerlessness of women in society have perhaps engendered a special kind of stigma against women on welfare.

SEX ROLE EXPECTATIONS

There are, of course, particular expectations as to roles of men and women in society. Man is the breadwinner, the worker, the support of his family. Woman's role is, generally, to be married, to stay in the home and bear and rear children, to keep the house, and to be an adjunct to man in his endeavors.

These roles are basic both to the sustenance of the family and to the continuation of our society. Inextricably tied to these roles, however, are roles having to do with sexual behavior. In these roles men are generally free to do as they please, free to "sow their wild oats." Women -- the good wife, mother, etc. -- are constrained from promiscuous behavior by normative sanctions.

Why are such constraints seen as necessary for women? It may be because women are seen to be as capable of sexual freedom as men, and for various societal purposes sanctions must be imposed to prevent sexual freedom. (This is not to say that sanctions do not exist against men for promiscuous behavior; however, when deviance occurs it is not sanctioned so severely or seen as so wrong as for women.) It is the inextricability of the respective roles (sex role and sexual) that produces a special personal vulnerability when the person seeks public support. The ability of the man to support his family is evidence of his manhood. The woman who is "attached" to a man is seen to be behaving according to social norms. The "disattached" woman is free not only from support by the man but is potentially free sexually.

Because of this inextricability of roles, it seems obvious that when a man cannot fulfill the role of support his role as a man can be questioned. This harsh judgment has to do with personal failure, and the ultimate agony is probably the public admission, through application for welfare, that he is no longer man enough to support his family. For women this inextricability of roles provides a different, though no less harsh, penalty for deviance. If a woman becomes disattached, thus violating the marriage role, she has "fallen" from the grace of a man and thus of society, since marriage is "the way people ought to live." A taint of sexual "easy-ness" attends the divorcee. Concomitant with this is the necessity that she find support. This is tantamount to assuming a man's role: even though such assumption is a deviance from the home-making role, especially if she has children, it is required by society. If she clings to her "woman in the home" role and seeks public support, she violates not only the expectation that there be an attachment to a man but the secondary expectation, coming from the assumed support role, that she will work. This double deviance produces stringent sanctions: she and her family are public liabilities, and the public admission of her failure in the marriage role brands her, since she seeks public support, as at least potentially sexually immoral.

Any woman who works, disattached or not, is subject to discrimination on two fronts. In the first place, she is competing with men against years of socialization for everyone in society about women's roles. Speaking of the woman entering the work field, Goode says:

...their motivation to do so is undermined initially by a socialization that still emphasizes that certain jobs are male tasks, and that a woman should not take a career seriously. In addition their motivation is continually undermined by the acceptance in all western countries of the idea that a woman must choose between two exclusive alternatives -- work or home -- an idea demonstrated best by the fact that the married working woman is still expected to carry on all her domestic duties, regardless of job demands (Goode 1970: 65).

The second front for discrimination is that there is a kind of honorary status of respect granted the woman who stays in the home to take care of husband and children. Loss of this status is keenly felt; it is a pervasive sense of guilt at deviation from the prescribed role.

When support of children is involved, the mother seems automatically to be given the responsibility.

It is a curious paradox that the growing emancipation of women and the gradual, though uneven, success of their claim to equal opportunity...is coupled with the almost universal acceptance that it is the mother who must carry the main burden of responsibility for the care of the children (Yudkin and Holme 1963: 158).

When the father leaves the home he is expected to help support the children. However, if he does not, action may or may not be taken by the courts to insure his contribution, and the level of contribution is generally low. In many states the woman applying for welfare has the responsibility of bringing court action against the father for support of the family. Once begun, and despite reciprocal state support laws, the action may not be followed through to gain support. The responsibility for such suit is the woman's and it is a requirement before aid can be given.

WOMEN AS POSSESSIONS

One of the keynotes in treatment of women throughout history has been the stance that women are possessions, to be owned (for life or for the moment) or disowned by men. The expectation of women's dependency naturally followed, and with it a second keynote, the dichotomization of women as "good" (dependent upon one man). Three major patterns emerge which deal with "the woman question": the pattern of domination of women because of legitimation of children and inheritance rights; religion and the development of patriarchal attitudes; and that of economic issues.

1. Legitimation of children and inheritance rights

According to Engels, the subjugation of "mother right" and the matriarchal line (for inheritance) was the "world historical defeat of the female sex" (Engels 1951: 16). As wealth increased, and with it the importance of man as breadwinner, the importance of legitimacy for inheritance to male heirs increased. Monogamy and the control of women's sexual behavior became necessary. Corollary to this monogamy were the institutions of prostitution and slavery, insuring the sexual accessibility of women through ownership in almost every case. There were, of course, rare instances of women with wealth; a woman in Roman times could upon the death of her husband control inherited wealth at least until her sons were grown. In the Greek age there was a thriving business in state-approved prostitution. The hetaira could become a woman of wealth and influence. Nevertheless, the pattern of male "right" to possession (of women and/or wealth) persists even in these instances.

The "women as property" status exists throughout history and culture. In different societies control was achieved by such methods as harems, purdah, punishment of adultery by death, and so on. There has been a "gradual shift

from direct physical control to a system of complex and subtle taboos" (Figs 1969: 40). But when a woman was left without the support of a man there were various ways in which to insure control, from the custom of suttee or burial alive with the husband to the idea of being bonded or given to another man. An unattached woman had no place in society unless it were as a possession or a prostitute.

2. Religion and the development of patriarchal attitudes

Some of the earliest religious traditions are those which ascribe sexual immorality to women, or warn men that they will be led astray by women appealing to their "baser natures." Thus Eve tempted Adam, pure soul that he was. In fact, according to religious history, she was responsible for man's mortality and fall from grace. The development of this kind of tradition within the structure of religion made for strong control of the woman. She embodied all weaknesses and left the man strong, intact, and morally superior. That women believed these traditions too left man with a definite edge.

Even before Eve, God created Lilith, who became the mother of demons and harlots when she left Adam, unwilling to be submissive to him. Rabbinical treatises from the first century BC deal with women as equated with sin and sexuality.

Harlot and demoness, they are one and the same thing. Or rather one should say, harlot, demoness, and unnaturally rebellious woman...for Lilith was really the first example of that awful creature later to be dubbed the "emancipated woman" (Figs 1969: 42).

Some of the strongest sexual prohibitions against women are written into the Deuteronomic revisions of the Jewish Book of the Law (Leviticus, ch. 12 and 18-21). Here emerge two patterns. The first has to do with in-group/out-group behavior, and served a purpose in uniting Jews under the Yahwist religion. There could be no marriage with a non-Jew woman, and even "profanation of the seed" of a Jew was forbidden. The Yahwist religion was a movement away from the old gods, the fertility cults, the orgiastic religious celebrations. Paid temple harlots were a part of these fertility cults, and thus were seen as immoral not only from the standpoint of unity of the family but from the view of the developing Judaic religion. In-group women, bonded to a man and living within Yahwistic law, were decent. Women of the out-group were seen as impure, as prostitutes and harlots. Religious and moral precepts were thus added to property and inheritance issues.

There is a growing devaluation of sex (equated with the bad woman and lust) throughout the Old and New Testaments. Basic to this is the idea that if sex is wicked, women must be wicked also. Some of Jesus' first converts were harlots for whom he advocated forgiveness and rehabilitation. Yet within a few years of Jesus' death Paul was calling for celibacy and saying that women had no place in the church, generally setting the anti-woman tone still extant in Christianity.

As sex became evil and women were considered its purveyors, the general acceptance of the sexual immorality of women grew. Any woman was assumed to have the capacity for such immorality, and warnings against harlots gave way to warnings against women in general. Note the religious battle against

We find then, that the earliest beginnings of western culture saw women as property, and this belief was accelerated by capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. Thus a woman's proper role has been attachment to a man. The ultimate determination of her status had to do with man's expectations and with economic assumptions. Obviously, then, the disattached woman is deviant, and deviance from the "good woman-as defined" role leaves only one alternative in the cultural eye. If she is not supported by one man, then by any man? or all men? Do we not feel, subconsciously perhaps, and guided by the unspoken normative standards and rules of our culture, that public support is indeed a form of prostitution?

SEXUAL STIGMA ON WELFARE AS RESPONSE TO THREAT

Moving now to another perspective on welfare, we observe that in general expressed hostility indicates fear. What have we to fear from this group of people without power, without skills or education, without legitimation in this society, kept alive only by the uneasiness we feel about letting people starve when we have the means to feed them? There are three discernible causes for the fear which may find expression in hostility toward women on welfare. They can be seen as a threat to resources, a threat to our own perceptions of status, and a threat to the established morality norms of the society, in which we all have a stake.

1. Resource threat

There are two resources against which women on welfare might pose a threat. The first is monetary; the second is a threat to women in the sense of fear of losing their own men.

The fact is that we are not living in an economy of scarcity in this society. Yet, when welfare is the subject of debate, scarcity of money seems to be a major fear. Theobald says

The barriers to the elimination of poverty are not economic.../but/ moral and social. The United States is not willing to apply its vast productive potential to the elimination of poverty (Theobald 1968: 76).

And Etzioni:

The modernized societies command an enormous capacity for material production which can satisfy most of the material needs of their members. Inequality is maintained to a significant extent because of a psychology of scarcity...and because of the prestige and power implications of increased equality (Etzioni 1968: 618).

The cost of welfare is a minuscule amount compared to other costs. In fiscal 1971 37% of the total budget nationally was spent for military purposes, whereas 2% was spent for welfare payments (NWRO 1971: 11). Though scarcity may be a psychological issue in the provision of welfare it is not a real one.

The second threat involves the fear of loss of husband by married women. This has two facets. There is hostility toward divorcees and widows and an attitude that assumes their sexual availability. The commission of sex with

witchcraft as an example. Witchhunts were primarily directed against women and had to do with the rooting out of carnal lust "...which is in women insatiable..." (Figes, OP. CIT. p. 52, quoting Sprenger, circa 1500). Because of its tie to fertility cults and nature worship, witchcraft was fought from earliest times to "keep religion pure."

The religious perception of all women as potentially immoral served two purposes. It legitimated man as the moral force and excused him from falling because, after all, it was her fault; and it convinced women not only of the moral rectitude of the man but of the precarious position that all women held in relation to the "fallen woman." In ancient Judaism there was at least some protection -- a woman was not automatically considered evil (foreigners excepted). But in Christianity, which some regard as a male cult (Figes 1969: 150), any woman could fall. Even the attachment to a man was no real protection because she could have "tricked him with her wiles." The image of woman as wily witch lingers even today.

3. Economic issues

Until the downfall of the guild system and the advance of capitalism there was little difference in treatment of the poor according to sex. The over-riding consideration had to do with sustenance and the work ethic. Business was centered in the home and both man and wife had status in their division of labor. However, with the breakdown of the home business, the woman became entirely dependent on the wages brought home from the factory by the man. If those wages were not sufficient, she had to find work, preferably in the home because of the children.

Women who had to work outside the home (and their children) became the cheapest pool of cheap labor. At first they were systematically excluded from the guilds, then from the factory, on the basis that they could not handle the heavy machinery. Ironically, this became a major factor in the exploitation of women, for after they were excluded so that any labor rights gained did not apply to them, they were used as a "cheap labor threat" to hold down wages for men. Since they had to support families, they would take what work they could find at the wages offered. Despite advances since then, much the same situation exists for women as cheap labor today (Ferriss 1971).

Among poorly-paid working class women, prostitution flourished as a means to supplement income. Statements decrying such behavior were common, but there was a tacit approval because prostitution kept pure the women men wanted to marry. Thus poor women were regarded as possessible and therefore possessions, and the purity of other women was for the purpose of insuring legitimacy, enlarging businesses through marriages, and so forth. Victorian morality (along with Freud) at last decreed that good women did not have sexual feelings, that they were the source of legitimate children, and that only "bad women" were available for passion. Both ladies and working women were commodities in a sense -- they were items of economic trade.

In a society where men have an over-riding interest in the acquisition of wealth, and where women themselves have become a form of property, the link between sexuality and money becomes inextricable. Sexuality then has to be strictly controlled -- all sexual relations with women become either a way of spending money or amount to stealing another man's property (Figes 1969: 83).

a woman other than wife -- infidelity -- is perceived by women as the worst sign of a failing marriage. Moreover, loss of husband means loss of the only fully legitimated means of support for the family. Socialization has taught that a woman's role is to be supported by a man. To this end, many women simply do not know how to go about supporting themselves, and if they must can only do that at a much lower level than that which a husband might provide (because of lack of skills and job discrimination). In a very real sense if they lose their men they have little means of financial support, let alone the emotional, personal, and social rewards of the married life. Moreover, they know that they will suffer the same loss of status as the women they fear. This could be a very real reason for the hostility of attached women for women on welfare.

2. Status threat

The above shades into the next area of threat, fear of status loss. Though women on welfare do not cause this loss to other women, generally speaking, they are indicative of the fact that such a fall can happen. Women in this society are in a fairly precarious position; their support as well as their position of status derive mainly from the position of their men. Men can put women aside, and have done so regularly, and though women can also put men aside, sanctions against this appear to be much greater in our society.

The fear of status loss, and what it would mean in terms of becoming a disattached woman in our society, may be the source of much hostility toward women on welfare. By disavowing their similarities to such women, other women heighten their own perception of social distance, thus denying the precariousness of their own positions. Even women on welfare themselves disavow similarity with other women on welfare whom they consider less moral (Mandell, 1971). This might be considered a harmless self-deception to assure one's own security if its expression did not so injure women on welfare.

3. Moral threat

Finally there does exist the basic threat to society in the dissolution and weakening of marriage ties. With the growing divorce rate, other incidences of what is considered moral deviance, such as group marriages, cohabitation with marriage, etc., it seems a natural reaction of those with vested interests in society, which we all have, to strike out at those who deviate from this most basic norm. And the most obvious and visible of those who deviate, and the most available for public sanction, are those whom the public is called upon to support.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper has been to make a case for consideration of sex discrimination as a major factor in negative attitudes toward women on welfare. Both men and women on welfare have been subject to attitudes of hostility, but for men the issues of welfare have not been considered in this paper. Deviance from sex role expectations for women on welfare remains a source of hostility toward them, and because women are expected to assume a work role if they are disattached from a man those seeking welfare are publicly labelled as doubly deviant.

Discrimination toward women in religious, economic, and legal traditions has served both to evaluate women as possessions of men, in one way or another, and to dichotomize them by labelling them as "good" or "bad" depending on how they fulfill their expected sex roles. There seems to be no middle way in the public eye. Being attached to a man lends an aura of respect. Becoming disattached brings a taint of sexual immorality which seems to be an outgrowth of centuries of cultural socialization. Moreover, it provides rationales for considering the woman on welfare as a source of threat to both national and family resources, to status, and to society.

CONCLUSION

While sex discrimination is increasingly becoming a popular topic for study, research, and polemic, it presents a special problem for women on welfare, because it is hidden under considerations of work ethic. Those who speak loudest against sex discrimination in general, and those who have power to work against it, do not see the problems of women on welfare as stemming from sex discrimination. Until we, and they, realize that the work ethic problem is one which confounds and obfuscates the real issue of women on welfare, this powerless group will continue to be branded as outcasts of society with the "scarlet W."

REFERENCES

- Bell, Winifred. AID TO DEPENDENT CHILDREN (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).
- Bernard, Sydney, and Philip Booth. PUBLIC ASSISTANCE POWER STRUCTURE (Paper prepared for the National Conference on Social Welfare, San Francisco, May 1968).
- Chesler, Phyllis. "Men Drive Women Crazy," PSYCHOLOGY TODAY (July 1971: p. 97 ff.).
- Crowley, Joan, and T. Levitin and R. Quinn. "Seven Deadly Half-Truths about Women," PSYCHOLOGY TODAY (March 1973).
- Engels, Friedrich. THE WOMAN QUESTION: SELECTIONS FROM THE WRITINGS OF MARX, ENGELS, STALIN, AND LENIN. (New York: International Publishers, 1951).
- Etzioni, Amitai. ACTIVE SOCIETY (New York: Free Press, 1968).
- Etzioni, Amitai. MODERN ORGANIZATIONS (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966).
- Ferriss, Abbot. INDICATORS AND TRENDS IN THE STATUS OF AMERICAN WOMEN (Russell Sage Foundation, 1971).
- Figes, Eva. PATRIARCHAL ATTITUDES (New York: Stein and Day, 1969).
- Goode, William. WORLD REVOLUTION AND FAMILY PATTERNS (New York: Free Press, 1970).
- Gronbjerg, Kirsten. THE AMERICAN WAY OF WELFARE (working paper, November 1970).
- Harrington, Michael. THE OTHER AMERICA (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963).
- JACKSON CITIZEN PATRIOT, Editorial. (Jackson, Michigan: January 3, 1974).
- Kallen, David, and Dorothy Miller. "Public Attitudes Toward Welfare," SOCIAL WORK (July 1971), pp. 83 ff.
- Klein, Philip. FROM PHILANTHROPY TO SOCIAL WELFARE (York, Pa.: Jossey-Bass, 1968).
- Mandell, Betty. "Welfare and Totalitarianism: Theoretical Issues," SOCIAL WORK (January 1971), p. 25 ff.
- National Welfare Rights Organization. "Six Myths about Welfare," (Washington, D.C.: NWR0, 1971), pp. 8-9.

- Theobald, Robert. AN ALTERNATIVE FUTURE FOR AMERICA (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1968).
- Tropman, John. ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE, PUBLIC OPINION AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE, Working paper (October 1969).
- Tropman, John. THE WELFARE GAP, Paper read at the Annual Meeting of the ASA, (New York City, August 28, 1973).
- Weber, Max. ANCIENT JUDAISM (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1952).
- Weber, Max. THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1958).
- Yudkin, Simon, and Anthea Holmes. WORKING MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN (London: Michael Joseph, Ltd., 1968).