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HERITAGE AND POLITICS  
OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY FOR RURAL WOMEN

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In the course of researching the subject of this paper I requested a computer literature search. Using sociological, economic and psychological data bases and a comprehensive list of descriptors, I was able to retrieve only five references. Of those, only one was of significant value to me in dealing with the specific issues involved in the oppression of rural American women.

The paucity of material available through so-called "legitimate" channels was, for me, a telling point. The worst kind of oppression and inequality occurs to groups that are, in effect, "invisible". If no one has identified rural women as an oppressed class and is asking questions about them, whence will come the solutions to the problems?

My major sources of reference material for the current work have been the single significant reference from the computer search ("An Assessment of Research Needs of Women in the Rural United States: Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography" by Lynda M. Joyce and Samuel M. Leadley), Directors of women's social service programs in rural areas, the national office of Rural American Women, Incorporated (an organization devoted to identifying and articulating the needs of country women in such a way that governmental programs will become responsive to them), interviews with financially impoverished rural women who were classed as recipients and non-recipients of rural services, and my own experience as a country woman--frequently poor.

It is clear that any discussion of the issues of poverty and inequality as they relate to rural women must be firmly anchored to two overarching principles.

First, that in a capitalistic society poverty is inequality and any group that is consistently subjected to unequal access to the material goods of the society becomes, de facto, an oppressed and unequal class.

Second, that the dynamics of ritual oppression that apply to rural women are, at their heart, the same as those which serve to oppress all women within the society and are, as well, the same as those which oppress all other minority groups. It is primarily in the methodological specifics that the oppression of rural women differs from that of other groups and,

while awareness of the nature of these specific differences of method (some subtle, some not) is crucial to understanding and approaching a solution to the problems of rural women, we must remain ever aware of our kinship with all other oppressed groups, learn from them where we can, and support them in their struggles, so like our own, to obtain access to the goods---material and otherwise--of this world.

It is hardly necessary to discuss the historic origins of the oppression of women as a class which have been documented in detail by so many competent scholars. Brownmiller (1975:17) sums up the history of women's oppression succinctly when she states:

"It seems eminently sensible to hypothesize that man's violent capture and rape of the female led first to the establishment of a rudimentary mate protectorate and then some time later to the full--blown male solidification of power, the patriarchy. As the first permanent acquisition of man, his first real piece of property, woman was, in fact, the original building block, the cornerstone of "the house of the father". Man's forcible extension of his boundaries to his mate and later to their offspring was the beginning of his concept of ownership. Concepts of hierarchy, slavery, and private property flowed from and could only be predicated upon the initial subjugation of woman."

This concept of woman as chattel continues today, particularly in the area of financial equity and independence where, as Chesler (1976:258) says "Women of whatever class are in trouble if they are dependent on the income which they have through a man, for the love of a man, or the pleasure of a man." If such is the case, all married women must be classified as "in trouble" given current property and credit laws and, as will be noted later, most rural women are married, or expect to be married, or are divorced, for most of their lives.

From yet another point of view, if Vivian Gornick is correct when she says that, "By any definition woman is an outsider--a person outside of the mainstream of the society, outside of the arena in which decisions are made--"; it is more intensely true for rural women who live for the most part in a subculture of individual isolation about which men make all major decisions and where men control the means of production, supported by both formal and informal value systems ranging from the bank to the good old boys' network that meets each morning at the gas station or the feed store or the coffee shop to swap and deal and decide the business of the day.

essentially, the position of rural women has not changed in the last fifty years despite major changes in rural economics, as the means of production moved from the small family farm to agribusiness. (The effect of the gradual and deliberate erosion of the viability of the independent family farm on the position of rural women is an issue more complex and pervasive of the rural atmosphere than can be dealt with in the context of this paper which proposes to address all rural women, rather than the specific subgroup of farm women. I suggest that the changing role of the female farmer would be a fruitful source of future research.)

The review of the research literature on women in rural America compiled by Joyce and Leadly in 1977 showed that women at agricultural conferences in 1926 and again in 1976 completed separate and independent lists of demands which are shocking and, from the point of view of the lack of progress indicated, discouraging in their similarity.

In 1926 the women demanded "Recognition of the value of their work, to be classed as "women" not "farm" or "rural" women, to be recognized as women of ability and understanding and as a viable social force."

Fifty years later, in 1976, "The women desired recognition, fuller utilization of their abilities, and greater respect in law and public consciousness for their contributions in the home, farm and community. They expressed lack of self esteem and confidence and the need to educate those in power to recognize the competence and potential of women."

Furthermore, as Joyce and Leadley report, most of the research on rural women has been done in terms of their "expressive" functions--as complements and help meets to their spouses (92% of all rural women are married). Despite the fact that nearly all rural women work alongside their husbands outside the home (e.g. running farm machinery, tending livestock, keeping business records), the greatest part of the literature refers to them as "farmer's wives" rather than as "farmers" in their own right. In many states the widow of a farm owner must prove that she made a monetary as opposed to a labor contribution to the family farm in order to take it over without paying crippling and frequently unaffordable inheritance taxes.

Although the situation of rural women is perhaps not so astonishing when it is put into perspective with the national statistics which show that women as a group earn 59¢ for every \$1.00 earned by a man, we must bear in mind that we are talking here about the lives of real women who have labored long and faithfully and honestly throughout their lifetimes to feed and

clothe an urban-oriented society which virtually ignores their existence during their working lives and then disenfranchises them from the source of their incomes upon the death of their spouses.

In the current study I have attempted to address myself largely to an exploration of the more subjective factors that make the oppression of rural women different from that of other oppressed groups. In speaking with my informants, described earlier, I found seven major themes recurring in our conversations.

First, physical isolation. Women repeatedly told me that they did not have physical access to activities and services they needed. There is virtually no public transportation available in rural areas and, if a family is fortunate enough to have an operable vehicle, it is seen as primarily the property of the husband or other male head of household. Women "get out" to do the wash at the local laundromat and to do grocery shopping and other domestic errands. Other ventures into the outside world are generally made only with the permission of the spouse. With increasing fuel prices and continuing long distances to be traversed to get to any of the services women need, "permission" for these trips is on the decline.

Social isolation is a second theme which emerged. The great physical distances separating neighbors and lack of accessible transportation can lead to extreme social and emotional isolation for rural women. It is possible in Maine, where I live, to pass a week or more without seeing another person outside of one's own household if one is the family member charged with the expressive functions of the family---cooking, cleaning, waiting for the children to get off the school bus at the end of the day. Winter is the worst time: Suicide rates in Maine in March rise dramatically due to what we all know very well as "cabin fever"--a form of insanity resulting from protracted periods of isolation from others. This phenomenon appears to affect women cross-culturally. In Eskimo society there are proscribed rituals which deal with women who, suffering from the protracted sensory deprivation of arctic winters, lose touch with reality.

A third theme and strong influencing factor is strong support in rural areas from folkways and mores of female--oppressive behaviors. The "woman-as-chattel" mentality appears to be more in evidence among impoverished rural people than in other mainstream cultures. Women frequently stated and accepted as a given that their husbands would not "let" them engage in thus and such an activity. They did not, as a rule, entertain the idea that such chatteldom was questionable.

Another predominant theme in some of the folk subcultures was one of absolute familial independence and mistrust of available social services which frequently leads to women's not being able to take advantage of services which they desperately need. One young woman, the mother of an out-of-wedlock child, reported to me that, when she announced her intention to apply for AFDC for herself and her newborn child, since the child's father was unable to provide for them, she was visited by several female members of the putative father's family who told her that "their people" simply did not go "on the State" and, therefore, she was not to go "on the State."

A fourth theme that recurred in my conversations with women was the lack of opportunity for non-farm employment. If a rural woman wants to establish an identity other than "farmer's wife" in order to gain some measure of personal recognition and financial independence and if her husband decides to let her work and if she has access to reliable transportation, she is free to face the fact that there are few non-farm jobs available, that those industries which may be in her area provide low wages and few benefits and that there will be blatant sex-discrimination practiced at the workplace.

To quote from a comprehensive study of eight Maine communities undertaken by the Women's Training and Employment Program of the Department of Manpower Affairs in Maine:

"In spite of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity, occupational segregation does not show any definitive signs of diminishing in the communities studied, although a glimmer of activity does appear from time to time. There appears to be an unarticulated but pervasive belief on the part of employers and employment policy makers that women's employment contributions are supplemental and intermittent; that employment investments in men have a higher pay-off. This argument may have had some merit in the past but today's reality is that women's labor force participation is both greater and less likely to be intermittent than ever before. Furthermore, a woman's income is often the sole income, or where it is not the only income it often makes the difference between living in or out of poverty."

A fifth theme that emerged was the lack of positive role models for rural women. Jane Threatt, Executive Director of Rural American Women, Incorporated, summed up the position of rural women vis a vis the role models available to them on television (their major source of information and valuing) as follows:

"The television media, when they have bothered to look, have too often portrayed an image of rural people that is distorted, outdated, and damaging... Too often rural people are stereotyped--as the people left behind, the ones who didn't have enough ambition or energy or intelligence to move to the cities where the best jobs and other opportunities are bound to be located. The 66 million people living in the rural United States have a deep reservoir of lively, important stories to tell and a hunger for accurate and sensitive portrayal of their lives in television news, television documentaries and television serials. Television programs overrepresent male perspectives, offer stereotypical views of children and older people and women... Television provides a special window on the world. It determines people's perceptions. It can create its own reality--and the psychological effects can be devastating."

The sixth, and perhaps one of the most complex, of the issues which recurred as I talked with my informants was the importance of an informal news network in their ability to make decisions and to function on a day-to-day basis. In many ways the system functions positively for impoverished rural women as it passes on news of well-baby clinics along with the recipes, for ways to turn government surplus canned meat into something--anything--a family will eat,

There are, at the same time, two very real drawbacks to this system.

The first is that information passed on through it often becomes garbled and inaccurate. As Jennie Stoler observed in her 1979 study of women in rural Vermont.

"it is clear that women most often viewed the outside world and formed their opinions in relation to or in terms of the impact of the various policies and institutions on their families or their own communities. This is not surprising in that women have always formed the interface between the family and the community (the church, the school, the grocer, etc.). Issues were very often perceived in very personal rather than general policy terms. Thus opinions were most clearly formulated and verbalized on community issues, becoming vaguer as conversation dealt with state and federal issues. A lack of access to accurate information very obviously contributed to such vagueness."



Information gathered through this informal network clearly leaves rural women at a disadvantage in the area of organizing to take political action on a policy-making level which might in some ways serve to improve their situation.

The second, and perhaps most dangerous, feature of the informational system is its ubiquity and its governance, in general, by the female-oppressive folkways mentioned above. There is little, if any, sense of confidentiality about a rural woman's talk or action. Everything she says or does is community property and, to the degree that she is invisible as a separate creature in rural research, to such a degree she is marked for observation in her real life.

The seventh and last theme that emerged was the power of kinship networks and here again, it is a mixed blessing. Rural people tend to marry and settle within their natal communities. Even the young who go away for a time tend to return home to raise their families. From this point of view the setting is a propitious one for utilization of natural self-help networks and includes all the benefits that accrue from the intergenerational structure of the extended family setting.

However, at the same time, the kinship ties can support woman-oppressive behavior with an effectiveness that surpasses that which made the trains run in Mussolini's Italy.

The director of a shelter for battered women in Maine told me of a case in which the only two officials to whom one of her clients could report being battered by her spouse were the uncle and the brother-in-law, respectively, of the perpetrator, both of whom refused to take any protective or legal action. Consequently it was necessary to relocate the woman and her children to a strange community some 300 miles away at an already turbulent time in their lives.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The very fact that the question of the oppression of rural women as a class was a legitimate topic for discussion at the Society for the Study of Social Problems was, I feel, heartening. Perhaps we are, at the very least, becoming visible.

And things are changing in rural America.

Jennie Stoler reports from Vermont on the several theses underlying the concerns common to the women involved in those changes:

"First of all...are the ambivalent feelings about changes which have occurred and are now occurring in the entire fabric of (rural) society. While much change is considered unfortunate and beyond control, and "must" therefore be accepted, in the case of institutional changes deliberately induced by government policy, there is considerable scepticism about the benefits of change and a more active desire to recapture some of the good features of the "old ways" and a tendency to romanticize the past. Secondly there is a frustration which, while related to change and the problem of adjustment to change, also appears to be more specifically related to an erosion of power traditionally exercised by women. While women have entered new occupational fields, and have taken on new roles, they have lost influence in some areas, including areas outside of the home, especially as more public decision making is removed from local communities."

Perhaps the major question which we need to address at this point as rural women seek to establish their identity and special equality is: How does social change occur? Chafe (1972:245) summarizes the issue nicely when he says that

"There are two fundamental responses to the query. The first is based on the premise that attitudes determine behavior and that ideology is the crucial variable affecting the process of change. According to this argument, people act on the basis of their values or beliefs. Hence a change in society can be come about only through persuading the public that a given set of values is wrong and must be modified. The second position--far more sceptical---operates under the assumption that attitudes, especially those involving emotional matters such as race and sex, almost never change except under compulsion and that behavior is a more promising fulcrum for change than attitudes."

As rural women work to accomplish the changes that will improve our lives we need to be mindful of both phenomena and, perhaps most important, to remember that, in spite of (and perhaps because of) the particular history of oppression that is ours we have developed unique strengths upon which to build our lives.

While we may have inherited inequality, we do not need to will it to our daughters.

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