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The Resilient Appalachian Woman: Lesson from Life and Fiction

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Appalachian women face barriers to self-sufficiency in many aspects of their lives. A review of the relevant literature provides evidence of both barriers to self-sufficiency and examples of personal resiliency. Faced with limited resources and high need for themselves and their children, mountain women have persevered and even thrived throughout history.

The concept of self-sufficiency has been a topic of much discussion among policy makers and stakeholders of programs that have been designed to assist women and their families in their journey toward economic independence. The assumptions underlying differing approaches will have a direct impact on how programs and support systems are designed and how desired outcomes are defined. On one end of the spectrum is a norm based approach which views self-sufficiency in terms of the Protestant rugged individualism and work ethic based upon the assumption that it only takes hard work and determination to be successful. Within this approach, “people are viewed as independent beings who are becoming economically self-sufficient and empowered without social supports” (Freeman, p. 524). In other words, programs designed to address the lack of self-sufficiency will simply focus on finding employment for the individual. The expectation is the individual is able and willing to work hard which will ultimately result in a high-wage job and economic independence.

Much of the early literature on welfare reform and reform’s ultimate goal of ending clients’ need for welfare by attaining self-sufficiency focused on the pervasive obstacles that prevented some women from being consistently and fully engaged in the workforce. This research was dedicated to improving the understanding of these barriers so that more effective programs could be created to assist women in their efforts to overcome these obstacles. Findings from this research suggest that barriers stem from numerous sources and may best be discussed using a framework that categorizes these sources into subgroups. The classifications of barriers that will be utilized for this literature review are identified as (a) intrapersonal barriers; (b) human capital; (c) interpersonal barriers; and (d) environmental barriers (Stevenson, 2005).

Listen and Learn Research in 25 East Tennessee Counties

Low-income women and girls were interviewed using a list of questions designed to determine what were the most effective strategic actions to take in order to transform their lives and others in similar situations. The researchers developed a Listen and Learn protocol for the interviews and trained the interviewers and scribes in technique. Interviews were conducted in teams with one interviewer, a scribe and the girl/woman interviewee. Interviewers were trained to focus on

the interviewee and leave the documentation of the interview and the responses as the responsibility of the scribe. This allowed a conversational approach and the opportunity to build trust. The interviewer and scribe were encouraged to develop the demeanor of a neutral and to be open to the opportunity to learn and change their attitudes as a result of the interview process. This technique is an opportunity to engage with women that might feel disempowered due to their life circumstances.

The girls and women were asked the following questions:

- What strengths do you have that may need supported in order for you to live a better life?
- What strengths does your community have that may need supported in order for you to live a better life?
- What in your life makes it difficult to increase your family income and become financially secure?
- What in your life makes it difficult to live a healthy life and have fewer medical problems (physical and mental)?
- What in your life makes it difficult to secure safe, affordable housing?
- What in your life makes it difficult to live a safe, violence-free life?

Categories Identified as Challenges to Resiliency

Content Analysis of the transcribed interviews was completed and 5 categories were identified as issues faced by Appalachian women living in 25 East Tennessee counties:

Domestic Violence

Definition: A pattern of behavior that inflicts physical and/or emotional pain on the victim and is used to gain and maintain control over the victim. Domestic violence can take the form of physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse or control.

Domestic Violence can result in:

- Homelessness
- Permanent physical disability
- Feelings of low self-worth and helplessness

Physical or Mental Illness

Definition: The presence of a physical or mental condition, including alcohol and drug abuse or addiction, that interferes with a woman's ability to find and maintain employment. A woman may personally suffer from these conditions or she may be impacted by a child or other family member who suffer from these conditions.



Physical or mental illness may be exacerbated by:

- Lack of physical or mental health providers
- Lack of health insurance
- Lack of dental care

Education and Work-Related Skills

Definition: The lack of skills or tool kit needed for successful and long-term employment. The missing tools might include formal education or technical skills; employment history required for securing a position; or work readiness skills and knowledge regarding workplace norms.

Examples of missing tools are:

- High school diploma
- Technical or vocational skills
- Basic employment skills such as punctuality and how to appropriately interact with co-workers
- Reliable child care arrangements

Lack of Life Skills

Definition: The lack or underdevelopment of knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in today's world.

These missing skills or lack of knowledge may include:

- Financial literacy or basic financial management skills and knowledge
- Awareness of or ability to navigate system of available services to improve food or housing security
- Parenting skills to promote security and foster the well-being of their children and to provide a positive role-model
- Lack of basic social skills and knowledge about healthy social interactions or basic hygiene

Transportation

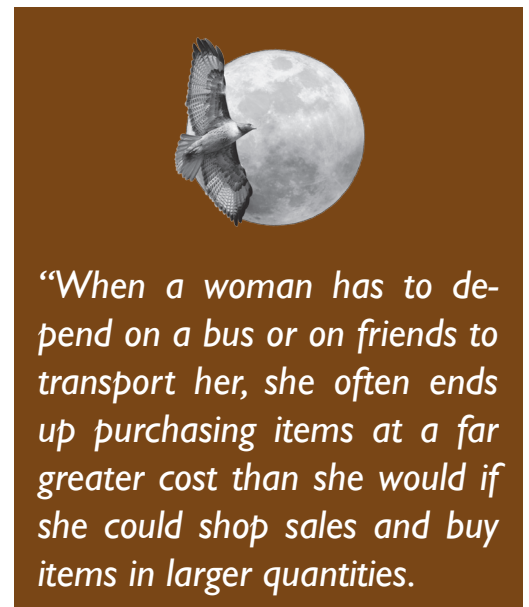
Definition: The lack of ownership or access to a reliable vehicle or the lack of access to public transportation.

Lack of transportation can limit a woman's ability to:

- Be independent
- Search for employment
- Attend work or school
- Secure reliable child care

Quotes from the interview:

“When a woman has to depend on a bus or on friends to transport her, she often ends up purchasing items at far greater cost than she would if she could shop sales and buy items in larger quantities. This also goes back to the fact many of the women have no experience in



“When a woman has to depend on a bus or on friends to transport her, she often ends up purchasing items at a far greater cost than she would if she could shop sales and buy items in larger quantities.”

budgeting what little money they receive. We had one woman that asked us if someone would please go with her to the store and show her how to shop for food.”

“Most disadvantaged women are not even aware of everyday skills missing in their lives. If we had the time and resources, the most important thing we could add to our agency’s programs would be intense parenting training and financial literacy classes with opportunities to practice what they learn.”

“Someday I may get a job, just not sure where to start.”

“I hope my daughter can get a job and maybe get married one day. I want her to have a good life-it’s too late for me.”

Evidence of Resilience in Quotes from Appalachian Women Authors

Sharyn McCrumb, Mildred Haun and Amy Greene give excellent examples of domestic violence in their works and how their female characters deal with their abuse.

Sharyn McCrumb in her novel, *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers*, gives her reader the perspective of a local talemonger:

“A younger sister, nothing but a kid. Now there was the mother, of course. They say there was no love lost between them, but after thirty years and six young’uns, I can’t see her smiting her man in a fight. Folks around liked him well enough, and even if she didn’t, she came from a family with lawyers and sheriff’s among ‘em. Besides, she had stood them all those years with Christian fortitude. (18)

Another example of domestic violence and the perspective of the community is given in the voice of her character Ritter :

It’s often the way, Ritter told him. “When a brow beaten woman finally shoots the brute, she’ll empty every chamber of the gun into her victim, and, as she fires, every single shot will be punctuated by a scream. BANG. Scream. BANG. Scream. Until the gun is empty. Of course. The poor devil has snuffed it long before she runs out of bullets.” (25)

Mildred Haun in *The Hawk’s Done Gone*, deals with domestic violence in the voice of the narrator as an observer:

I heard Enzor say hurtful thinkgs to Amy too. Sometimes I could. He told her she was ugly as a mud fence dabbed in tadpoles – threwed that up to her one time when he was mad. That hurt because Amy wanted to be pretty and she never was. Big and rough. But that wasn’t her fault. That comes from too hard working. And she is looking old now. Too much thinking. I guess. If she thinks. And I reckon all folks do –all that can. But no matter how spiteful Enzor was , it looked like he just sort of charmed Amy like some folks charm bees and flies. (62)

Amy Greene’s heart wrenching account of Myra’s ability to transport herself to another time and place as she is raped in *Bloodroot* is told in Myra’s voice:

When we arrived at home I sat in the car and waited for him to pull me out by my hair, my knees scraping in the dirt. Grunting and puffing, he dragged me across the yard, my scalp screaming. He yanked up my dress and wrestled my legs open. There was no use begging him to stop. I fought hard but I was tired and he was strong. He forced himself on me as I looked up at the stars. I tried to send my soul floating out of my body again, back up to Bloodroot Mountain. Tears ran from the corner of my eyes toward my ears. Whatever I'd done wrong in swallowing that heart, surely this settled the score. (258)

Mildred Haun in *The Hawks Done Gone* and Amy Greene in *Bloodroot* also deal with issues of mental and physical illness.

Through the voice of the narrator Mildred Haun gives us insight into the misunderstanding around mental illness and the fact people suffering are often viewed as demonic or witches:

I wish Dona had told me sooner. For a long while after I married Ad I thought Barshia mighty queer. Right from the first I took note of it. For a long time I wanted to ask somebody about it. But I never could bring myself to name it to Teelie. For Teelie was counted queer too. But one day Dona Fawver came and spent the day with us. She helped me get dinner. And I named something about Teelie a-coming to see Barshia and cutting his hair for him. Dona asked me if I ever feared Teelie. Some folks talked, she said, about what Teelie did – things a witch would do. (44)

Haun gives us another example as a family struggles to understand:

Linus stayed over three nights and then he come home. He said Effena was plumb hog-wild, didn't know what she was doing, didn't sleep in the house at night. That made me think some more but I didn't say anything. He said she laid out in the fields and slept. It was getting fall. (82)

Amy Greene in *Bloodroot* using the voice of Birdie expresses how women in the community try to help other women in the special challenges they face in the physical health and well-being:

In 1969, the summer Myra turned twelve, me and her left Macon working in the yard one day and walked up to Cotters. Oleta Cotter had had female surgery and was laid up for several weeks, so me and Margaret Barnett took turns going up yonder to see about her. The Cotters live the furthest up the mountain and keep the most to themselves. They don't poke their nose in nobody's business, but they'd give you the shirt off their back if they knowed you was in trouble. I learnt that after Clio got killed. Oleta came down the mountain every day to cook for Macon and take care of Myra until I could get out of the bed. That' why I didn't care a bit to see to her worshipping and make sure them boys was fed when she was laid up. It was hot that day and I had sweat dripping in my eyes by the time me and Myra got halfway up to the house. Them two youngest Cotter boys, Douglas and Mark, ran out of the woods to meet us like wild Indians. They stopped in the middle of the road plumb out of breath. (64)

Wilma Dykeman gives a great deal of attention to education in her novels, *The Tall Woman* and *The*

Far Family. Her focus is not only on the women's concern for their own families but also for the education for their community children.

In *The Far Family*, a conversation between Preacher Grey and Brother Shook demonstrates the concern and barriers:

"Have you ever been up there to the Bludsoe's, Brother Shook?" Preacher Grey asked.

"Never had any business with them."

"Well, I went up. And it's my belief, Brother Shook that this valley will never prosper as it ought until the Bludsoe's are raised up, too."

There was a silence. Ivy watched Preacher Grey's face and the eye that seemed to look inward and the eye that focused ever more intently on squirming Lazarus Shook.

"The way we can raise them – all of us – is through our school here---" (208-209)

Dykeman addresses the concern of a father whose daughter is bright and might be denied an education due to circumstances in the voice of the father, Homer Bludsoe:

For the first time they saw a reaction from Homer Bludsoe. We'd be much obliged for that. She's really a good girl. Her grades in school, they was always the best of any of our kids. This – this trouble, it was like a sickness. Talking with somebody like you might help her get over it." (338)

Dykeman also addresses the need for education for all children in a conversation between Lydia and Dr. Hornsby in *The Tall Woman*:

"I want them to be fine, too, have a chance in life. Dr. Hornsby, you reckon we'll ever get a school worthy of the name in Thickety Creek?"

" I hope so Mrs. McQueen."

"My father had schooling," Lydia said thoughtfully. "He learned all of us children what reading and writing we know. And a little ciphering, too. But I want my children to go to a school-house and have a proper teacher. I long for them to amount to something. You know, my brother Robert has gone off to school. He's been away better than a year now. He wants to follow after the law." (95-96)

Sharyn McCrumb

Education Carl

Sharyn McCrumb gives the reader of *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* insight into the attitude of a rural community regarding a young woman seeking higher education:

Carl hesitated, "Well, I suppose it means they are not typical rural family. Not many people from little mountain hamlets go to college. Or at least it suggests that Miss Erma Morton is not a typical mountain girl. I think I read that she paid her own way to East Radford Teacher College." (85)

Amy Greene addresses the fact many mountain women are lacking in basic life skills in the voice of Birdie in *Bloodroot*:

Willis wasn't no good from the time he was little. He'd bite my nipple hard as he could soon as his teeth came in, and would fight me with his fists anytime he didn't get his way. Willis broke my heart everyday he was alive. I don't know what went wrong with that boy. I reckon it had to be something me and Macon done. Someway or another, we wasn't cut out to raise younguns. That might be why the Lord took them from us. All I could figure out was that we spoiled them too much. I believe we runit Willis and Clio by smothering them, and I reckon we did the same thing to Myra when she came along. I treated Willis like a little king, made him sugar cookies everyday until every tooth in his head rotted out, and he still hated me and Macon both. (46)

Amy Greene gives the reader insight into the importance and scarcity of transportation in *Bloodroot* through Birdie's voice:

I will never forget the first time Macon took me up Bloodroot Mountain. It was the spring of 1913, not long after that day we hid Easter eggs. He lived up here and took care of his pap that had a stroke and his two sisters after his mammy died. We had to take a mule and a cart, because there wasn't no road then. There was just a dirt track that you could ride a horse or mule on. It was getting to be afternoon and the sun glared in our eyes all the way up the mountain. Shadows fell across the road and I was nervous. Mammy hadn't wanted to let me go but I had begged Pap. Now I was having second thoughts. It seemed like Macon was taking me off to some haunted place. I pictured all kinds of creatures hiding in them woods, but they was pretty even though they was thick. The creek was pretty, too, rushing down off the mountain alongside the track. I tried to sit back and enjoy the ride but every time I looked down my belly sank. It was a long way to the valley below. By the time we got up here I was about half sick. Then we rounded the curve and glimpsed the house up on the hill with a little barn off to the side, the sky bright blue over top of its red tin roof. The sun was shining down on it through the trees, the edges of the leaves tinged with gold. It looked so nice my heart fluttered. (32-33)

Greene again gives the reader a different yet similar perspective two generations later in *Bloodroot* through the voice of Laura:

Clint understood how bad I missed the mountains. He said, "Soon as I get me a car, I driving you there." I knowed he was saving up money from his job. Going home seem like something way off in the future that might never happen. Then one day Clint came to me grinning after school. It was spring already, close to the end of my freshman year. He led me out to the parking lot and there it was, along green car with a busted plate on the windshield. First thing clint sais was, "Now, I can take you home." I knowed he was not talking about Larry and Pauline's house. I hugged Clint tight and felt like crying, but not with happy tears. My heart was beating loud in my ears. (128)

Dykeman presents an interesting and perhaps prophetic passage in *The Far Family* in a conversation

after Phil and Clay visited a family after the death of one of their members:

With a sudden shift in mood, Clay turned on him. “Yeh, yeh, I know how you’d handle everything, you and your ‘advanced’ city folks: Mama would go to a ‘nursing home’; I’d be put away in a sanitarium; we’d get Hank’s widow and kids on relief right away—and then everything would be all neat and cozy, no problems around to clutter up the view everyday, to sweat over and cuss at.” (169)

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