

# Fleshing Out the Racial Undertones of Poverty for Canadian Women and their Families: Re-envisioning a Critical Integrative Approach<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper argues for re-envisioning a critical integrative approach to poverty in lone mother families. In order to substantiate our argument, we unpack the concept feminization of poverty by fleshing out its racial undertones. We also show how a gendered and racialized understanding of poverty in lone mother families is neutralized and/or erased in political and policy discourses and media.

## Résumé

Cet article discute la revisualisation d'une approche critique intégrative envers la pauvreté chez les familles de mères seules. Afin de prouver le bien-fondé notre point, nous développons le concept de féminisation de la pauvreté en soulevant ses nuances tons raciaux. Nous montrons aussi comment une compréhension de la pauvreté des familles de mères seules racialisée et basée sur la différences entre les sexes est neutralisée ou effacée dans les discours de politiques et de lois et dans les médias.

Poverty continues to be a pressing social problem for many families in Canada. The income gap between rich and poor Canadian families continues to widen but while the incomes of wealthy families have increased, it is among poor families that incomes are more likely to stagnate or worsen (Statistics Canada 2008b). Across Canada, experiences of poverty are not shared equally among families. Racialized, immigrant, Aboriginal, and lone mother families are among those groups mostly likely to experience income that falls below Statistics Canada's low-income cut offs (LICOs) (Morissette and Picot 2005; National Council of Welfare 2006). Scholars devoted to the study and understanding of poverty consider the intensification of poverty for lone mother families as demanding serious attention. Simultaneously, government and policy discourses acknowledge poverty and its detrimental impact on lone mother families and increasingly citizens are being exposed to the experiences of lone mother families, such as through *The Toronto Star's* newspaper article series titled the "War on Poverty."

We observe, however, that within the majority of academic, policy, and media discourses on lone mother poverty, the diversity of lone mother families and their experiences are oftentimes invisible. Dominant approaches to poverty in lone mother families, such as the culture of poverty thesis, class based analyses, or individualist choice models (Elmelech and Lu 2004; Lewis 1966) that are discursively reproduced, fail to understand poverty as the product of multiple and intersecting social dimensions (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status and citizenship) that operate to structure women's lives within existing and stratified social hierarchies. Although the feminization of poverty thesis has gained a strong-hold in

understanding poverty in Canada in some feminist circles, these circles are largely academic. Many government and policy discussions surrounding poverty rarely illustrate a gender-based analysis and mention of lone mothers is often grounded in largely pejorative political rhetoric. And, while the feminization of poverty thesis has offered a corrective to essentialist academic theorizing by highlighting gendered experiences of poverty, this perspective suggests (erroneously) that women and children share a universal experience of poverty, despite differences in race/ethnicity, Aboriginal status, and citizenship. An understanding of the racialization of poverty within Canada has only limited application in academic scholarship, eludes the majority of government and policy discourses, and is conspicuously missing in media coverage. The failure to apply a critical in-depth analysis to the issue of poverty in much of the dominant discourse has therefore only served to obscure the very real and persistent inequalities that exist among racially and ethnically diverse lone mother families.

Considering that we have yet to consider exhaustively the connections between race, gender and poverty, we contend that race/ethnicity as social dimensions potentially detrimental to lone mothers' income security must be theorized in ways that parallel and expand upon the feminization of poverty thesis and become sufficiently integrated and more so contextualized with gender in analyses on poverty in Canada. We therefore suggest the need to re-envision a critical integrative approach to women's poverty, an approach that is intersectional, relational, and multidirectional, allowing for a critical consideration of when, where and how feminization and racialization converge to produce specific experiences for specific groups of lone mothers in different contexts.

### **The Feminization of Poverty**

Coined by Diana Pearce (1978), the feminization of poverty refers to women's greater propensity to experience low income when living singly or as a lone mother and without the financial support of a man (Hartman 1992). Generally speaking, the majority of

scholars who favour this approach to women's poverty would agree that the intent is to consider critically the convergence of individual and structural factors that contribute to their low income experiences, including reproduction, union dissolution, aging, the gender segregated labour market characterized by income and occupational disparity, and health and disability (Hartman 1992; Starrels, Bould and Nicholas 1994; Townson 2000).

The importance of this perspective is confirmed by the current literature and data on women's poverty. According to the report *Gender Equality Consultation: Poverty Issues for Canadian Woman*, 1.5 million adults were living in poverty in 2003; for adults aged 18 and older, 54% of low income persons were women (Townson 2005), who were more likely than men to experience lengthier periods of low income. Women's experiences of poverty were credited to their patterns of paid work (much of which is temporary, part-time and seasonal) and unpaid work, their cultural backgrounds and family citizenship status, and the design and administration of inadequate income support (or social assistance) programs. Lone parenthood, disability, and age were identified as intensifying the experience of poverty for specific groups of women in Canada (Townson 2005).

In 2004, female lone parent families had a higher rate of poverty (measured using LICOs) than lone father families (35.6% compared to 14.2% respectively) (Canadian Council on Social Development 2008). Between 2000 and 2004, poverty rates for lone mother families remained unchanged. And, compared to two parent families, lone mother families consistently experienced lower earnings and higher income instability (Morissette and Ostrovsky 2007). The recent release of 2006 Census data confirms that the number of lone mother families in Canada has surpassed one million - and that they continue to be the most impoverished of all families in Canada (Statistics Canada 2008a).

The value of the feminization of poverty perspective cannot be stressed enough. However, it is doubtful whether this perspective has as much weight outside of feminist scholarship as do other dominant theoretical

explanations. And, there are distinct limitations to this perspective within academic scholarship itself. This perspective does suggest (erroneously) that women and children share a universal experience of poverty, despite differences in race/ethnicity, Aboriginal status, and citizenship. Experiences of poverty in lone mother families cannot be grouped equally and fit tightly under a broad umbrella - they need to be deconstructed to adequately recognize the diversity of women's lives (Palmer 1983).

### **Fleshing Out the Racial Undertones**

In recent academic scholarship, the "racialization of poverty" thesis has been deliberately used to forefront the experiences of socio-economic inequality and disadvantage among non-white groups and Aboriginal peoples, often in a way that captures poverty as linked to historical and ongoing processes of colonization, migration, assimilation, racism, and sexism (Galabuzi 2001). Compared to white Canadians, individuals from all racialized groups suffer disproportionately from inequality in pay, unemployment and underemployment, under-representation in well-paid jobs, and over-representation in low-income sectors of the labour market (Galabuzi 2006).

When the feminization of poverty concept is unpacked, it becomes apparent that there are racial undertones to poverty in Canada and that issues of race and ethnicity have not always been adequately incorporated into feminist analyses of the poverty experienced by women and their families. Given the uneven nature of female poverty, "either/or" dichotomous analyses of women's poverty that focus on gender as a stable and essentialist category by transcending differences among women due to race, citizenship, and other social dimensions have also been limited in scope and application. As Phyllis Palmer observed over two decades ago, the feminization of poverty should be more appropriately termed the "racial feminization of poverty" (Palmer 1983, 4). Such a conceptualization of poverty considers how race, citizenship status and socio-economic status privilege certain women whilst disadvantaging others.

Among all Canadian women, it is particularly racialized and Aboriginal women who constitute the poorest of the poor. Data from the 2001 Census show that 29% of racialized women were living in poverty in the year 2000. Women who immigrated to Canada between 1991 and 2000, the majority of whom were racialized women, had a poverty rate of 35%. And more than 36% of Aboriginal women compared with 17% of non-Aboriginal women were living in poverty in 2000 (Townson 2005). More recent data from the 2006 Census shows that the 2005 median income of Aboriginal women was still below the low income cut off and far more women were dependent on government transfers as a source of income than men (Statistics Canada 2009).

### **Lone Mother Families in Toronto**

In the city of Toronto, the poverty experienced by racialized women is compounded by their lone parenting. In fact, lone mother families who are poor have been steadily increasing in numbers (United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development 2004). Over the period 1990-2005, Toronto lone-parent families' median income decreased; compared to all other Canadian Census Metropolitan Areas, median income in 2005 was the sixth lowest in Toronto (Statistics Canada 2008b). Poverty rates for Ethiopian, Ghanaian, Somali, Tamil, Vietnamese, and Central American lone mother families in 1996 were above 80% (Khosla 2008, 223). Our own preliminary fieldwork in one downtown west Toronto community suggests that multiple factors compound and intensify the experience of poverty for racialized Canadian-born and immigrant lone mother families, including health problems, human capital barriers, unequal access to employment and health services, and their residence in poor quality housing in racially segregated neighbourhoods.

### **Discursively Neutralizing Gender and Erasing Race in Policy and Anti-Poverty Activism**

We contend that outside of some academic scholarship and the work of anti-poverty activists, the poverty of women has

been and is being effectively discursively neutralized. Attention to women's experiences of poverty in the government and policy literature is fleeting and when it is recognized, it has been in largely a pejorative manner. Moreover, even when dominant political and policy discourses on poverty demonstrate some gender awareness, albeit usually in stigmatic ways, they are otherwise blind to race/ethnicity. While the concept of the racialization of poverty has recently grown in use in Canadian academic scholarship, it is arguably absent - or erased - in government and policy discourses and media coverage. Here, we briefly demonstrate the discursive neutralization of gender and erasure of race through the dominant explanations of and understandings about poverty that materialize in Canada's "war on child poverty," social assistance policy reform in Ontario, and representations of poverty and related activism in contemporary media coverage.

At the national level, the child as the iconic subject of social policy became entrenched in the late 1980s (Brodie 2007). The "war on child poverty" was declared in 1989 with the House of Commons resolution to end child poverty by the year 2000. One of the ways the federal government has pursued this anti-poverty objective is through the restructuring of child benefits policy, e.g. the 1998 introduction of the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS), to better support low income families regardless of the source of their income. And yet, within the political and policy discourse on the use of child benefits to combat child poverty, children's experiences of poverty are consistently divorced from their parents' actions and behaviours despite the fact that "it is the poverty of women that is behind the poverty of so many of our children (Townson 2000, 1)."

Within the discourse that drives the reform of social assistance programs in Canada, the appearance of gender neutral social policy can also be observed (Brodie 2007; McKeen 2004). The feminization of poverty does not register and rather the problem of lone mother poverty - "dependency" on welfare - is to be corrected by individualistic assumptions of mothers' employability potential

comparable to that of men. Mothers' entitlement to income support on the basis of their caregiving for children is effectively neutralized. When social assistance policy increasingly operates on a gender neutral adult worker model (Gazso 2009; Lewis and Giullari 2005), lone mothers' continued receipt of benefits is most often contingent on their meeting of mandatory employability expectations, such as attendance of welfare-to-work programs (Evans 1996). Hence, when government and policy discourse on children's poverty and social assistance reform denies the gender specificity of women's poverty, we see evidence of what Wendy McKeen (2004, 89) terms the "new gender blind approach to social policy." This approach denies how women's poverty is exacerbated by discriminatory and gender segregated social structures (e.g., the labour market) and their membership in particular racial/ethnic groups - the gendered and racialized subject who experiences poverty disappears.

Media coverage of discourses on poverty that are sensitive to intersections of gender and race/ethnicity vary depending on whether journalists review reports by national agencies (Statistics Canada), government campaigns and activist agendas, or write opinion pieces. A review of the "war on poverty" series run in *The Toronto Star* over the period April 2007- April 2008 reveals only two specific references to the racialization of poverty but these were with regard to coverage of anti-poverty activism. For example, one article reviewed how the Colour of Poverty Campaign, a coalition of groups, stressed the need to recognize racialized poverty in Ontario at an April 2008 forum. However, this same article also stressed the decision of the Ontario Minister of Children and Youth Services to focus on reducing children's poverty first (Talaga 2008).

Judith Goode and Jeff Maskovsky observe that one of the problems with contemporary efforts to understand and "solve" poverty in the United States "lies not in poor people's invisibility but in the terms on which they are permitted to be visible in public discourse" (2001, 2). In Canada, it is not just poor women's voices that are overlooked in

poverty debates, it is the efforts of their activist sisters too.<sup>2</sup> Feminist voices continue to disappear and be "written out" (McKeen 2004, 107) from the ongoing debate about poverty. Coupled with the particular theoretical explanations that are drawn upon by policy makers and government officials in the Canadian poverty discourse, what therefore continues to be missing is a cohesive and collective awareness of women's poverty as feminized and racialized.

### **Re-Envisioning Directions in Theory for Practice**

The lack of a critical in-depth analysis of the issue of poverty and the steady reliance on limited explanations of poverty in much of the academic, government, and media discourse has only served to obscure the very real and persistent inequalities that exist among racially and ethnically diverse lone mother families in Canada. Thus, we conclude with our argument that we need to re-envision a critical integrative approach to women's and especially lone mothers' poverty in Canada that appropriately contextualizes gender and race within academic and policy discourse and media coverage and requires future poverty interventions to address its feminized and racialized substance. While the substantive assumptions underlying our approach are shared by many feminist scholars and are not new, our approach extends current analyses by re-envisioning how policy practice can bridge multiple discourses and actors and simultaneously challenge monolithic conceptions of lone mother poverty in Canada.

Unlike dominant and unrealistic explanations of poverty that filter through powerful discourses or the selective focus of the feminization and racialization of poverty theses, a critical integrative approach to poverty embraces and intentionally reveals how race/ethnicity, gender and other social conditions and dimensions operate in and through one another to produce poverty for diverse women. This approach appreciates and endeavours to understand the complex relationality that frames women's social, economic and political lives (Mohanty 1991a, 13). Specifically, individual/personal factors

(e.g., racial/ethnic identity, level of education, age) and institutional/structural factors (e.g., educational and labour market opportunities, availability of health and child care) are assumed to intersect, interact and converge in multidirectional and fluid ever-changing relationships to produce experiences of poverty. From this approach, the objective is to critically consider and engage in a deeper probing of when, where, and how these factors converge to produce specific experiences for specific groups of lone mothers in different contexts. Moreover, a critical integrative approach requires attendance to the historical, material and structural context and conditions that produce societal inequality and the meanings assigned to it (Few 2007; Mohanty 1991a), and an interrogation of white power and privilege and patriarchy, and their accompanying ideological rationales for dominance. This approach recognizes the impossibility of discussing lone mothers' poverty separate from the historical processes that have determined their access to resources and opportunities.<sup>3</sup> A critical integrative approach also acknowledges women's transformative actions that produce or alleviate their poverty, what Chandra Mohanty (1991, 13) terms the "dynamic oppositional approach," and builds upon other scholars' arguments for placing poor people's agency at the centre of analysis (Goode and Maskovksy 2001). Two other assumptions especially underpin this approach.

First, a critical integrative approach eschews conventional Western and positivistic notions of poverty as a stable, unified concept (e.g., one is poor if one's income falls below a low income cut off) and women who are poor as a homogeneous group (Mohanty 1991b). It allows for an analysis that understands poverty as discursively produced, as an experience that is produced within and arises out of the individual, unique, and specific life experiences of specific groups of women, including historical, structural, institutional and personal barriers. Following April Few (2007, 453), who maintains that we must endeavour to understand the intersectionality or "politics of location" that shape the standpoints of women, the critical integrative approach offers a corrective to stable and uniform

conceptualizations of poverty that fail to reveal women's lived experience of poverty (Fukuda-Parr 1999), e.g., how lone mothers act as agents of change to challenge and transform the various socio-economic limitations and barriers confronting them on a day-to-day basis. It is an interdisciplinary approach that demands that we continue to ask different questions than those pursued under dominant discourses on poverty. For example: How do we understand a lone mother's experience of poverty within the context of her specific life experiences? How does a lone mother understand her experience of poverty? How is her experience of poverty shaped by her race/ethnicity, gender, citizenship, culture, religion, language and other social dimensions and conditions? How does she engage in transformative actions that enable her to transcend her marginalized position within the socio-economic hierarchy?

There is no question that many feminist scholars have already pursued an understanding of women's poverty in this relational and dynamic manner (Collins 1989; Few 2007; hooks 1981; Lerner 1993; Mohanty 1991b). We highlight these questions here to intentionally set this approach apart from the conventional starting points (e.g., LICOs) and assumptions (e.g., value neutrality, objectiveness) of dominant theoretical perspectives that are more concerned with defining poverty according to income level than with understanding how multiple social dimensions and factors converge to produce multiple and specific experiences of poverty for individuals and, in this case, for diverse women. With such questions to be answered, it is not surprising that a critical integrative approach demands the greater use of qualitative methods of research and researchers' self-reflexivity (Few 2007). Women's own narratives best yield how their experiences of poverty are inscribed by race/ethnicity, culture, immigrant status, etc., and shaped by structural conditions, and allow for an analysis of the commonalities and differences of experiences of poverty among diverse women.

Second, a critical integrative approach shares with anti-racist feminist research an emancipatory potential (Fawcett and Hearn 2004). It requires not only understanding the

poverty experienced by racialized lone mothers in a particular way but also tackling it. Specifically this approach embraces the "bridging" of multiple discourses on poverty and the very subjects and/or actors within these discourses. It intentionally draws together individuals from multiple sectors to strategize around the reduction and elimination of poverty, including activists, scholars, government officials, policy makers - and lone mothers themselves. It is an approach that demands that these key players share an awareness of the multi-directional relationships among various social factors and dimensions that create and perpetuate poverty and that are also by-products of poverty for racially/ethnically diverse women. In assuming multi-directional relationships, we again recognize that it is not new to argue that poverty both produces and is a by-product of the convergence of such factors as low education, un-/under-employment, and income and food insecurity, to name just a few. However, we stress the need to emphasize these relationships exactly because current academic, government, and policy discourses have largely failed to analyze the multi-directional aspects of poverty. A brief example will suffice to illustrate our point.

On the one hand, scholars working within a social determinants of health framework offer, perhaps, the most developed approach for articulating how gender and race are implicated in health outcomes because they pinpoint the social, environmental, economic, and political factors that compromise the health status and well being of marginalized groups and communities. Dennis Raphael (2006a; 2006b; 2007) identifies social determinants of health as including such things as health care services, education, and living and working conditions and especially acknowledges how differences in racial/ethnic and gender roles, expectations and available opportunities produce different health outcomes. However, while he addresses the role that gender and race play in producing health inequalities, gender and race are accorded separate analytical status in his discussion, leaving untouched the ways in which these social dimensions operate in and through one another

to produce specific health outcomes for racialized women specifically.

Thus, on the other hand, these analyses have been largely unidirectional, focusing on poor health as the main outcome of social inequality and poor social conditions. Little effort is made to articulate the complex ways that health status and health care barriers, along with educational underachievement, food insecurity and other factors, may create the social conditions that produce poverty. In addition, within this scholarship, we find problematic the scholarly tendency to discuss race and gender as parallel and independent forces acting on health. This de-contextualizes gender from race and obscures the specific gendered and raced experience of health.

We propose that a multi-directional approach to women's poverty may be more useful for articulating the non-linear and circuitous ways in which low-income and poverty are produced by and also produce and reproduce structural marginalization within the context of existing racial, gender and class hierarchies. Moreover, articulating the specific experience of lone mother poverty demands that scholars locate and contextualize the lived experiences of these women within multiple sites and/or institutional spaces (health, education, immigration, housing, labour and employment and the family) that operate simultaneously to produce and reproduce poverty among racialized women. It is an approach that demands collaborative multi-sectoral initiatives for reducing and eliminating poverty.

The Racialization of Poverty Research Praxis Unit at Scadding Court Community Centre in Toronto adopts the critical integrative approach we sketch out here. The Praxis Unit facilitates the "bridging" of knowledge from and collaboration by social actors from the public sector (e.g., government, health care), community organizations, and several academic disciplines (e.g., sociology, medicine, health) in the pursuit of a multi-pronged public policy approach to racialized poverty, especially as experienced by lone mothers. Collaborators are involved in several ongoing action-based research projects that attempt to understand

and dismantle the multiple and intersecting factors and structural arrangements that allow poverty to persist among racialized groups - and prioritize mothers' knowledge and experiences in the process.

In our view, the more complex analysis of difference offered by a critical integrative approach will allow the pursuit of a cohesive and collective discourse about women's poverty as feminized and racialized that can cut across multiple discourses and be represented in the media as such. Dominant theoretical explanations of poverty are not collapsed but rather integrated in the critical integrative approach in a manner that focuses attention particularly on identity and structural dynamics of gender and race/ethnicity. Analysis from a critical integrative approach must be multi-layered and multi-sectoral (e.g., involving public, private, community sectors) and bridge academic, government and policy, and community discourses on poverty. We must have a critical, inclusive and collective approach across multiple discourses - one that purposefully fleshes out the racial undertones - in order to challenge poverty effectively.

#### **Endnotes**

1. A version of this paper was presented at the "Social Inequality: Understanding Poverty Session" at the 43rd Annual Meeting of the Canadian Sociological Association in June 2008. The listing of authors is in alphabetical order; both authors contributed equally to the writing of this paper.
2. See the work of Canadian scholars Wendy McKeen (2004) and Janine Brodie (2007, 171-81) for comprehensive explorations of how neo-liberal policy reforms have delegitimized women's voices and/or the weakened and dismantled their advocacy organizations.
3. For example, the marginal position of racialized women in the labour market today can be traced to policies that imposed restrictions on these women and their families since the 19th century. From the 1880s to 1950, state policies restricted the entry of Chinese women into Canada as a means to maintain the temporary status of Chinese male labourers. Due to a quota system that restricted immigration, South Asian women were

prevented from entering the paid labour force in large numbers until "the points system" was implemented in the 1960s. And, despite the fact that Black women had access to employment opportunities in Ontario from the early 1800s, their labour was mostly confined to their homes, farms and domestic service (Leah 1999).

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