

THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY: RURAL APPALACHIA AND BEYOND

by

Holly Gallagher

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Approved by:

Nancy Love, Ph.D., Thesis Director

Janice Rienrth, Ph.D., Second Reader

Ellen Key, Ph.D., Departmental Honors Director

Jefford Vahlbusch, Ph.D., Dean, The Honors College

Abstract

Women living in rural Appalachia are faced with a unique set of barriers, causing poverty to impact them differently in comparison to their male counterparts and the nation surrounding them. The notion of women being more harshly affected by poverty is frequently referred to as “the feminization of poverty,” a topic which is further discussed in this research. The feminization of poverty is present for women all around the United States and has been pervasive for centuries. Pervasive hardship is also a characteristic of the Appalachian region, which has historically faced extreme poverty and unemployment rates, along with overall economic instability. The portrayal of these and other problems present in Appalachia have led to societally ingrained stereotypes and assumptions about the region, which this research clarifies and explains. This research primarily focuses on women in rural communities within Appalachia, connecting the feminization of poverty to the exacerbation of rural poverty, raising questions of what policy-based action has been effective in the past, what can we expect for the future, and what the poverty of women in the region says for the United States as a whole.

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Introduction

Poverty and inequality are problems that essentially every society faces, with the United States being no different. Despite the country being among the largest economies in the world and being one of the strongest, if not the strongest, global power, it still faces extreme poverty and income inequality. This issue of poverty is pervasive in the United States and has disproportionate effects on women, especially women of color. This can be seen throughout the nation, and specifically throughout the Appalachian region, which historically has suffered from high poverty rates, raising the question of what policy-based action has been enacted in the past, and what can be hoped of the future.

The following thesis will explain and contextualize the feminization of poverty, especially as it is pertaining to women living in rural Appalachia. The presented research will be broken into five main chapters: Gendered and Social Inequalities, Poverty in Appalachia, Rural Poverty in Appalachia, Female Poverty in Appalachia, and a Policy Analysis. The earlier chapters are intended to set a background of knowledge on the topic at hand, with a more detailed description and policy analysis later in the research.

Theories of Poverty

Before diving into poverty in the United States, Appalachia, and beyond, we need to present a better understanding of poverty, both in definition and theory. Poverty can be generally defined as: “the state or condition of having little or no money, goods, or means of support; condition of being poor.”¹ However, the specifics of this definition have been largely contested by scholars, with several variations and sub-definitions. Poverty, a general term, leaves significant room for contextual confusion. This raises question whether poverty solely represents

¹ “Poverty,” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/poverty?s=t>

financial means, or does it permeate into social and cultural capacities as well?² Valentine (1968) describes this latter notion by saying that, “the essence of poverty is inequality. In slightly different words, the basic meaning of poverty is relative deprivation.”³ This definition of poverty points to its subjective nature, being that it is generally open to interpretation.

Some scholars place the cause of poverty within the impoverished person themselves, a theory that is widely known as the “Individual Theory of Poverty.” This theory was famously elaborated on by Oscar Lewis’s ethnography, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. In this text, often referred to by the abbreviated title of ‘Culture of Poverty,’ Lewis argues that:

The people in the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, of not belonging. They are like aliens in their own country, convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. Along with this feeling of powerlessness is a widespread feeling of inferiority, of personal unworthiness.⁴

This explanation points to how poverty can become cyclical and is imbedded into the culture of impoverished individuals. It is elaborated further by saying that poor people and communities internalize their impoverished surroundings, causing them to remain in poverty. Many scholars studying within the individual theory of poverty point to the prevalence of poverty as a result of psychological and moral problems, including lack of motivation, poor trust in others and themselves, ignorance, irresponsibility, drug abuse, and more.⁵

The individual theory of poverty has been critiqued by other scholars, arguing that it fails to address the structural and economic factors at play for impoverished communities. This

² Vasintha Veeran. “Feminization of Poverty,” (University of Natal: *School of Anthropology & Psychology*, July 2000), 4.

³ C. A. Valentine, *Culture and Poverty*, (Chicago: *University of Chicago Press*, 1968), 194.

⁴ Oscar Lewis, *Five Families Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, (New York, New York: Basic Books Press, 1959), 7-9.

⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

second theory is widely referred to by sociologists as the “Structural Theory of Poverty.” This perspective says that poor individuals lack the resources they need to lead productive lives, largely due to systemic discrimination and other barriers that many impoverished individuals, such as racial minorities or women, face. This theory spreads further by arguing that said resources exist, but they are unfairly distributed, causing impoverished individuals to have less than others.⁶ This argument was formally introduced in 1987 by Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged*, where he argues that poor people “suffer from both race and class subordination.”⁷ This understanding of poverty was also discussed in Michael Harrington’s earlier book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, where he explains the ways in which there is a population of “the invisible poor.”⁸ Often being overlooked, impoverished Americans face hardships that are largely unaddressed by their government and other pertinent institutions. While Harrington’s book is over 50 years old, many of the ideas and issues remain accurate and relevant in the present day.

Introducing the Feminization of Poverty

The cause of poverty has always been questioned, and with an abundance of objective and anecdotal evidence to support or reject its root it likely always will be. This alone speaks to the importance of examining poverty further, especially the different ways in which it affects marginalized groups of people, such as women and racial minorities. Poverty impacts women more harshly than males. Women are 38 percent more likely to live in poverty than men, totaling 16.3 million women, nearly 13 percent of the female population. Even further, 45.6 percent of these women live in extreme poverty, which is defined as income at or below 50 percent of the

⁶ “Why the War on Poverty Failed,” (Foundation for Economic Education, 1999).

⁷ W J Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 83.

⁸ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 8.

federal poverty level.⁹ These numbers become more extreme when looking at the rates of poverty for non-white women, being 21.4 percent of Black women, 22.8 percent of Native women, 18.7 percent of Latinx women, and 10.7 percent of Asian women living in poverty as compared to 9.7 percent of white women.¹⁰

This gap between females and males in their rates of poverty is widely referred to as “the feminization of poverty,” a phrase which was coined by scholar and activist, Diane Pierce in the late 1970s. This term serves as a definition and explanation of the gap between female and male poverty, as well as the implications that go along with it. This is not to say that poverty began only to be ‘feminized’ in the late 1970’s; females have been suffering from poverty differently and at higher rates than men for centuries.

The prevalence of the feminization of poverty in today’s society is a result of centuries and decades of socialization on the basis of gender. Gender has been defined by sociologists as, “[A] term that refers to social or cultural distinctions of behaviors that are considered male or female.”¹¹ These social and cultural distinctions are developed beginning as early as when a person is born, with very different means of socializing the individual depending on their gender, and the expectations that go along with it. This socialization often continues throughout a person’s life and can be seen in the context of the feminization of poverty, as women have historically been treated differently and inequitably in the household, workplace, and beyond.

This has clear effects to this day, as seen by the wage gap, female-headed households struggling financially the most, and women’s disproportionate share of poverty overall.¹² When

⁹ Kayla Patrick. “NATIONAL SNAPSHOT: POVERTY AMONG WOMEN & FAMILIES,” (*National Women's Law Center*, September 2017), 1–4.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 1.

¹¹ Kenton, “Gender Definition”, (*Open Education Sociology Dictionary*, n.d).

¹² David Brady and Linda Burton, *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 228-229.

discussing these gendered discrepancies, it is also important to note the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. Intersectionality “emphasizes that social divisions like gender and class are better understood in relation to and mutually constitutive of each other, rather than as separate axes.”¹³ This interconnected relationship between gender, race, and class has important effects on trends in poverty and policies.

Of course, women and men living in poverty share very similar lifestyle circumstances, such as typically having low levels of education, lacking relevant job skills, or residing in locations that are lacking job abundance.¹⁴ However, women’s relationship with poverty transcends their shared characteristics with men. In general, women are socialized and treated very differently than men, so their differences in levels and causes of poverty are no surprise. This is as a result of the burden of childrearing and care being placed on them, as well as differences in the labor market.¹⁵ These, and other gendered disparities, can be seen throughout the United States.

¹³ David Brady and Denise Kall, “Nearly Universal, but Somewhat Distinct: The Feminization of Poverty in Affluent Western Democracies,” (Duke University: *Department of Sociology Social Science Research*, 2007), 3.

¹⁴ Diane M Pierce, “The Feminization of Ghetto Poverty,” (*Society Journal*, 1983), 70.

¹⁵ Diane M Pierce. “Welfare Is Not for Women: Toward a Model of Advocacy to Meet the Needs of Women in Poverty,” (*Institute for Women's Policy Research*, n.d.), 4.

Chapter One: Gendered Economic and Social Inequalities

Before detailing what gendered inequalities are found uniquely in the Appalachian region, it is important to gain a stronger framework of what is seen in the United States as a whole. This chapter will allow for a clearer picture of what barriers women face in the workforce and beyond today and what causes said barriers.

Defining Gender and its Implications

As the above definition suggests, gender within the United States is a binary social construct, with two widely accepted genders and respective sexes, male or female. These labels are formalized at the time of a person's birth, typically carrying widely different norms and expectations. There are ever-present aspects of socialization based on the biological sex of a person, stemming from the stereotypical pink or blue hospital blankets and nurseries, growing to permeate into social and professional expectations.

These gendered assumptions can be very harmful to transgender and non-binary identifying individuals, as they are often viewed as breaking societal expectations. The biological gender-based expectations can be seen in the home, schools, and everyday life for those who are gender non-conforming. Institutions, such as schools, can be especially harmful to gender non-conforming youths by perpetuating discrimination and abuse. Rather than being a place of security, schools often become areas in which harassment is experienced from their peers and, in some cases, even teachers and school administrators. This has caused many students to report that they feel unsafe in their school environments.¹⁶ Outside of school, gender non-conforming youths also can face consequences of breaking the socially accepted norms within homes. For many children and teenagers, these norms are strongly perpetuated by their parental figures.

¹⁶ Michelle Dietert and Dianne Dentice, "Growing Up Trans: Socialization and the Gender Binary," (*Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 9, no. 1, 2013), 24–42.

Bradley (2009), after studying perceived parental acceptance with psychological adjustment in transgender, genderqueer or gender fluid identifying children, found that rejecting behaviors caused greater psychological distress and behavioral problems. He also found that increasing neglect from the parent led to higher rates of depression in their gender non-conforming children.¹⁷

Similar barriers are faced by gender non-conforming adults, frequently prevailing in the workplace. This is seen within social interactions at their place of work, as well as in more blatant discrimination that could lead to harassment or, in some cases, the loss of their job. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, more than one in four transgender people have lost a job due to bias, and more than three-fourths have experienced some form of workplace discrimination. Further, many transgender and non-binary people face privacy violations, harassment, and physical and sexual violence on their job, with people of color facing the highest rates of discrimination and harassment.¹⁸ There are several laws and policies in place to protect gender non-conforming people in the workforce, which have allowed improvements to be made. For example, in 2002, only 3 percent of Fortune 500 companies had nondiscrimination policies based on gender identity. The most recent report, in 2018 showed that the figure had grown to 83 percent.¹⁹ However, the laws and policies currently in place do not span far enough to protect all gender non-conforming individuals in the workplace. Additionally, the social expectations remain to prevail throughout society in the United States, causing gender non-conforming people to continue to feel a significant sense of discrimination.

¹⁷ H. Bradley, (2009). "Transgender children and their families: Acceptance and its impact on well-being." (San Francisco, California: *California Institute of Integral Studies*, 2009).

¹⁸ "Employment," (*National Center for Transgender Equality*, n.d.)

¹⁹ George B. Cunningham, "Transgender Americans Still Face Workplace Discrimination despite Some Progress and Support of Companies like Apple," (*The Conversation*, 2019).

Socialization based on gender also has a great impact on cisgender individuals, or people “whose gender identity corresponds with that person’s biological sex assigned at birth.”²⁰ These gender labels are widely accepted as ‘male’ or ‘female’ and are assigned at the time of birth, with a growing impact as the person develops. For the purposes of this research and because of the limited data available, the primary focus of the following text will be pertaining to cisgender individuals, unless stated otherwise. This gendered socialization is pervasive in United States’ culture, and can have a significant impact on how women and men are treated inside the workforce and throughout social interactions in general.

The Pay Gap

This gendered socialization is one of the many reasons why there is a gender pay gap in the United States. Many people, when approached with this concept of a pay gap, question its validity, since it is 2019 and women have made strides in their equality movement. It is true that women, who at one point legally were not able to attend university, are now outnumbering men in American colleges. In 2003, there were 1.35 females for every male who graduated from a four-year college, compared to 1960 when there were 1.6 males for every female graduating.²¹ Women have also seen significant improvements in their participation in the workforce, with the number increasing drastically, moving from a rate of 32.7 women in the workforce in 1948 to a rate of 56.8 in 2016.²² These are just two examples of the many improvements made in the United States for women and by women, which are important to recognize when pointing out the current disparities in the workplace and beyond. The pay gap is one of the more prominent

²⁰ “Cisgender,” (Dictionary.com, n.d.)

²¹ David R. Francis, “Why Do Women Outnumber Men in College?,” (*The National Bureau of Economic Research*, n.d.).

²² “Facts Over Time - Women in the Labor Force,” (United States Department of Labor: *US Department of Labor Women's Bureau*, n.d.)

subjects pointed to when the discussion of gender inequality in the workplace arises, and the causes behind it are multifaceted.

Regardless of what many critics say, the pay gap does exist today. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) defines the pay gap as, “the difference in men’s and women’s median earnings,” typically as either an earnings ratio or actual pay gap.²³

$$\text{Earnings Ratio} = \frac{\text{Women's Median earnings}}{\text{Men's median earnings}} \quad \text{Pay Gap} = \frac{[\text{Men's median earnings} - \text{Women's median earnings}]}{\text{Men's median earnings}}$$

$$\text{2017 Earnings Ratio} = \frac{\$41,977}{\$52,146} = 80.499 \approx 80\% \quad \text{2017 Pay Gap} = \frac{[\$52,146 - \$41,977]}{\$52,146} = 19.501 \approx 20\%$$

Figure 1: Median Annual Earnings by Gender, (AAUW, “The Simple Truth About the Gender Pay Gap, Fall 2018), 7.

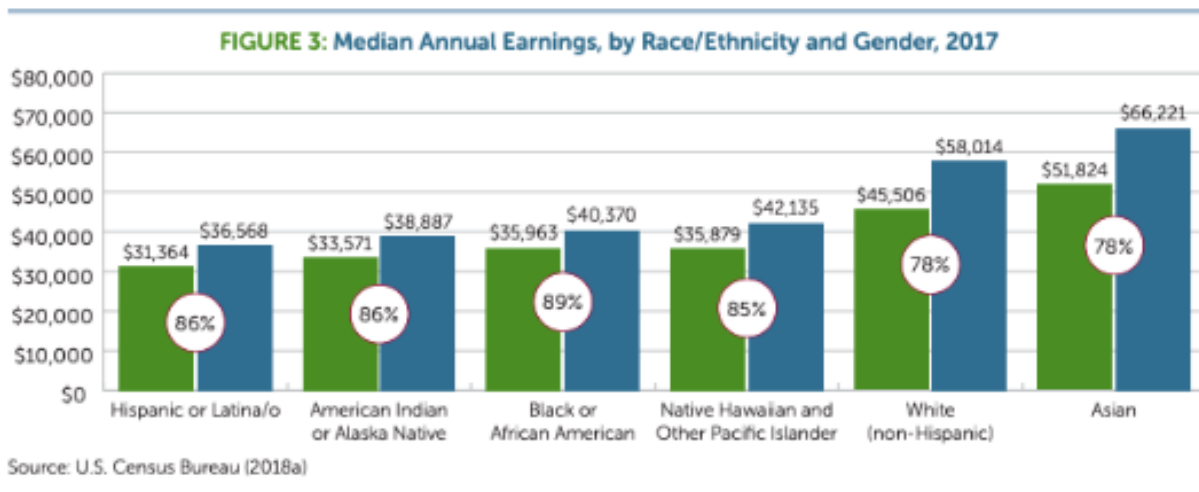


Figure 2: Median Annual Earnings by Gender and Race/Ethnicity, (AAUW, “The Simple Truth About the Gender Pay Gap, Fall 2018), 9.

As seen in Figure 1, women make roughly 20 percent less than men, or approximately 80 cents to the male dollar. It is important to note, in the context of these statistics, that not all groups of women have the same levels of pay disparity. These data become even more extreme when broken down by racial groups. Women of color face a far more extreme pay gap, as seen above.

²³ Kevin Miller, Deborah J Vagins, Anne Hedgepeth, Kate Nielson, and Raina Nelson, “The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap,” (Washington, DC: American Association of University Women, 2018), 7.

Within the major racial and ethnic divisions, there is even more variation. For example, among Asian women in the United States, women of Indian and Chinese descent are paid better than white men, on average, but women of Burmese, Hmong, and Laotian descent are paid much less, being approximately 60 percent of what white men earn.²⁴

Other demographic factors affect the pay gap as well, including age, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The pay gap, on average, increases with age, with the differences between older individuals being noticeably larger than the differences among younger workers. AAUW says that, “In 2017, for full-time workers ages 20–24, women were paid 90 percent of what men were paid on a weekly basis” but “Women 55–64 years old are paid 78 percent as much as men in the same age range, a gap that is more than double the gap for women ages 20–24.”²⁵ Disparities are also seen for women and men with disabilities, outlined in six types as: hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, and independent living. People with disabilities are paid less than those without, and disabled women earn 72 percent that of men with disabilities. Further, women with a disability made 48 percent as much as men without a disability.²⁶ Gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual men and women all have earnings divergent from their heterosexual counterparts. Across sexual orientation, the gender gap persists; regardless of sexual orientation, women have lower earnings than men.²⁷ Transgender individuals face extreme earning inequality and frequent discrimination and harassment in the workplace. More than one-quarter of respondents to a survey of transgender people reported an income of less than \$20,000 annually, while another analysis found that 15 percent of

²⁴ “Asian American and Pacific Islander Women and the Wage Gap,” (Washington DC: *National Partnership for Women and Families*, March 2019).

²⁵ Miller, et al. (2018), 10.

²⁶ Miller, et al. (2018), 10.

²⁷ Miller, et al. (2018), 11.

transgender people have earnings less than \$10,000 annually, compared to 4 percent of the general population.²⁸ While the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has legal wage equality protections in place for LGBTQ+ individuals under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, this federal legislation arguably does not span far enough, as it allows for inconsistencies in state and local governments.

Higher educational attainment leads to higher wages, for both men and women. However, at every level of educational achievement—some high school, high school diploma, some college or associate’s college, bachelor’s degree, and an advanced degree—women’s median earnings are less than men’s median earnings at the same level of completed education.²⁹ Racial disparities are present within this context too, with Black and Hispanic women earning less overall than white and Asian women.

The cause of the pay gap cannot be explained with one simple reason. It is not typically seen as a result of blatant discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, etc., although that is sometimes the case. Rather, it is societally embedded socialization that has caused the issues such as the segmented workforce, glass ceiling, childcare responsibilities, and the pregnancy penalty.

A Segmented Workforce

Women’s line of work is primarily concentrated in the lower-paying, secondary region of the job sector, which has been widely referred to by sociologists as “pink-collar” jobs. This term was coined in 1977 by Louise Kapp Howe, who discussed the rapid influx of women into the workforce, also bringing to attention the fact that women were funneled into ‘female jobs,’

²⁸ J. M. Grant, L. A. Mottet, and J. Tanis, “Injustice at every turn: A report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey.” (Washington DC: *National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, 2011). 2-3.

²⁹ Miller et al. (2018), 12.

characterized by low wages, long hours, and little room for professional advancement.³⁰ While women have progressed from the sole occupation of factory and clerical work, the pink-collar, gendered segmentation remains to the present day. As seen in Figure 3, the lowest paying jobs are primarily held by women, whereas men hold the majority in the highest paying jobs. This distinction is no coincidence; it comes from a history of women being funneled into lower-paying professions largely because of societal pressures.

Many critics of the pay gap point to how women are not ‘choosing’ typically high-paying college majors and career paths at the same rate that men are. However, there are several factors which typically lead women into the lower-paying portion of the job sector. This can point back to the impact of gendered socialization on women, with girls from a young age being encouraged to participate in homemaking and nurturing, which can transition into sanitation and childcare oriented positions. This socialization is pervasive as females enter higher education, with university courses that lead into higher paying careers being male-dominated. Take engineering for an example. According to the figure above, petroleum engineering is the eight highest paying career and consists of approximately 85 percent males. It is no surprise that, on average, 80 percent of engineering majors are male.³¹ This is just one of many examples that represent the gendered distinctions within higher education that can lead to a segmented workforce.

³⁰ Yasmin Zaidi and Winifred R Poster, “Sociology of Work: An Encyclopedia,” (*SAGE Reference*, 2013.)

³¹ Brian L. Yoder, “Engineering by the Numbers,” (Washington, DC: *American Society for Engineering Education*, 2015.)

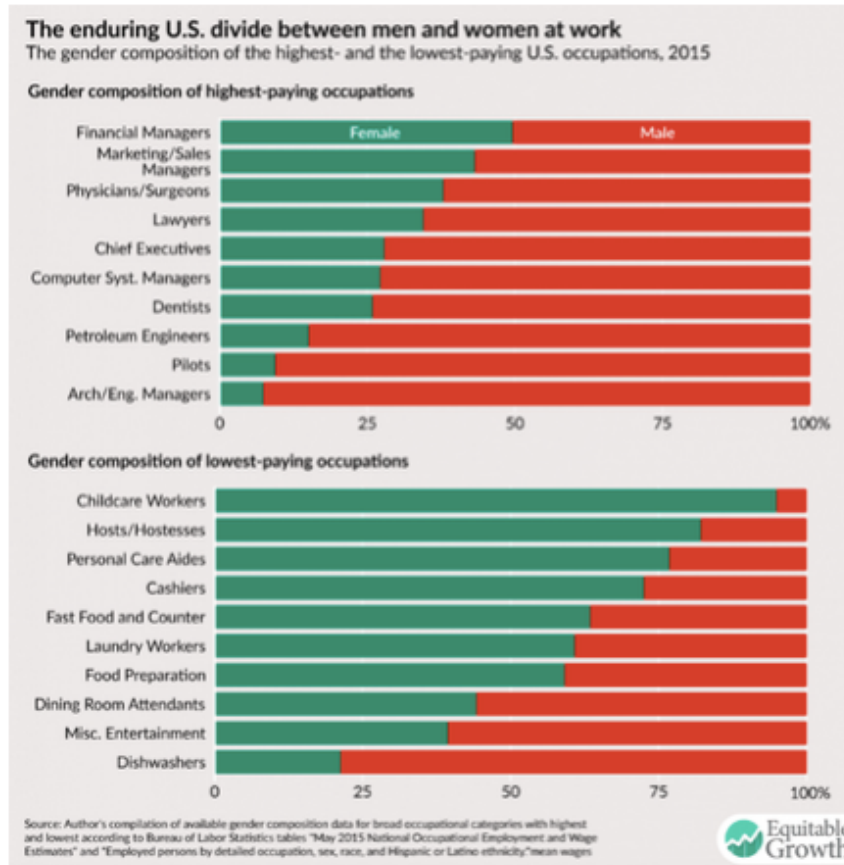


Figure 3: *The Divide Between Men and Women at Work*, (The Washington Center for Equitable Growth, *Occupational Segregation in the United States*, 2017), 2.

While the reasoning behind why males and females tend to choose different career paths is complex and can be subjective in some cases, much of the research points to a sense of intimidation and harassment that many women face when they break into male-dominated fields. According to a report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018), women in STEM face the highest rates of sexual harassment in any profession outside of the military, with nearly 50 percent of women in science, and 58 percent of women in academia, report experiencing sexual harassment, including 43 percent of female STEM graduate students.³²

³² Paula A. Johnson, Sheila E. Widnall, and Frazier F. Benya, “Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine” (*The National Academies Press*, 2018)

Even when women break into male-dominated fields, it is far less likely for them to hold leadership or other high-ranking roles. This is not as a result of women being underrepresented in the workplace as a whole, or of women receiving lower levels of education than their male counterparts, as stated in the text above. Women make up 47 percent of the workplace, but in many instances not close to that proportion in leadership and other high-ranking positions. For example, females hold under 5 percent of CEO positions at Fortune 500 companies.³³ This is shown in further the findings by McKinsey & Company, where white men hold significantly more roles within the corporate world; only about one in five C-suite leaders is a woman, and only one in twenty-five is a woman of color.³⁴

This phenomena is commonly referred to as the “glass ceiling,” meaning that women, or other minority groups, strive to climb high in their career path, but eventually hit a barrier, or ceiling. This phrase was first coined in 1987 by A.M. Morrison, et al. saying that:

Many women have paid their dues, even a premium, for a chance at a top position, only to find a glass ceiling between them and their goal. The glass ceiling is not simply a barrier for an individual, based on the person’s inability to handle a higher-level job. Rather, the glass ceiling applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher because they are women.³⁵

While this phrasing is now over 30 years old, it remains, arguably, just as relevant. Women in today’s workplace still struggle to reach their highest potential within higher level positions.

Homemaking and Childcare Responsibilities

Even though women have progressed within the workforce, expanding their options and moving beyond the expectations of being solely capable of housekeeping and caregiving

³³ Jeff Green, “Why 5 Percent Remains a Glass Ceiling for Female CEOs,” (*Bloomberg*, September 28, 2018.).

³⁴ Alexis Krivkovich, Marie-Claude Nadeau, Kelsey Robinson, Nicole Robinson, Irina Starikova, and Lareina Yee, “Women in the Workplace,” (New York, New York: *McKinsey & Company*, October 2018)

³⁵ Ann M. Morrison, Randall P. White, and Ellen Van Velsor. “Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America’s Largest Corporations?” (*Sage Journals*, 1987P), 156.

responsibilities, childcare still serves as a barrier for many women. Childcare is a large responsibility placed upon women, both during pregnancy and following the birth of a child. The issues faced by women in both of these circumstances differ, often being referred to as either the “pregnancy penalty” or the “motherhood penalty,” depending on what stage of motherhood the woman is currently in. In terms of the pregnancy penalty, there are short- and long-term effects. The short-term effects include changes in physical appearance and inducing disability, which can have significant impacts on how the woman is perceived in the workforce, as well as cause the pregnant female to be a victim of discrimination.

Mothers are often the primary caregiver of children which restricts work availability and creates a financial strain on the mother. Further, women are more likely to be economically self-sufficient if they have fewer children.³⁶ In 2012, 10.4 million mothers stayed home with their children, as compared to only 2 million fathers.³⁷ This is another societal expectation placed upon women, which inhibits their ability to have flexible work scheduling and options. Similar to childcare expectations, women are typically expected to assume the role of homemaking; being responsible for cooking, cleaning, and other home-related tasks. This is often referred to as the “second shift,” a term that was coined by Arlie Hochschild to describe the extra work inside the household that women take on, rather than their husbands. This, within heterosexual married couple households, requires women to spend more time tending to the household rather than resting or engaging in more enjoyable tasks. The 2008 Bureau of Labor Statistics analysis found a 0.69-hour daily gap on housework, and an 0.41-hour daily gap on childcare in families where

³⁶ Leigh Ann Simmons, Elizabeth M. Dolan, and Bonnie Braun. “Rhetoric and Reality of Economic Self-Sufficiency Among Rural, Low-Income Mothers: A Longitudinal Study.” (*Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 28, no. 3, June 2007) 492.

³⁷ Jennifer Bennett Shinall, “The Pregnancy Penalty,” (Minneapolis, Minnesota: *Minnesota Law Review*, no. Issue 2, 2018), 749.

both parents work full-time. This means that women, as of 2008, work a longer second shift than men, a difference of 1.1 hours daily.³⁸ While the level to which a second shift is relevant and present varies household by household, the concept speaks to the ingrained socialization and expectations of women that are present in the workplace and the household.

³⁸ “Table 2. Time Spent in Primary Activities (1) by Married Mothers and Fathers with Own Household Children under 18 by Employment Status of Self and Spouse, Average for the Combined Years 2003-06.” (Washington, DC: *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, May 8, 2008).

Chapter Two: Poverty in Appalachia

With this background on poverty and inequality in the United States, we now can further examine the intricacies of how women are impacted by poverty in Appalachia. Prior to discussing the feminization of poverty uniquely in Appalachia, it is important to gain a clearer overview of the region as a whole, historically, demographically, as well as through the perceptions of popular media and society. This chapter will provide a description of the Appalachian region, which will serve as the foundation of knowledge for the succeeding chapters.

Geography

The Appalachian region, often referred to as ‘Appalachia,’ is comprised of the Appalachian Mountain Range, but the exact boundaries of the area are widely contested. It is most commonly agreed that the Appalachian region spans from Southern New York to Northern Mississippi, reaching over 205,000 square miles and traveling through a total of 13 states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. The region is often broken-up into three subregions, usually referred to as Northern, Central, and Southern Appalachia, although sometimes the subregions are divided further, including North-Central and South-Central Appalachia.³⁹ These regions will be frequently referred to for specificity and clarification, and can be seen in Figure 4.

The Appalachian region is also understood as a very rural area in the United States, which plays a significant role in how issues in the region arise and are resolved. It is important to note that the region is not entirely homogeneous; the dynamics of the Appalachian region vary

³⁹ “The Appalachian Region,” (Washington, DC: *Appalachian Regional Commission*, n.d.)

greatly from county to county. Although the region is widely known as a rural area, it also has very urban areas such as Pittsburgh and Birmingham. However, the proportion of people living in rural areas of Appalachia is still much higher than the national average, at a rate of 36 percent rather than the national rate of 15 percent.⁴⁰ The rurality of the entire region also varies within each subregion. As portrayed in the figure, Central Appalachia is almost entirely rural, and its urban areas tend to be clustered together.

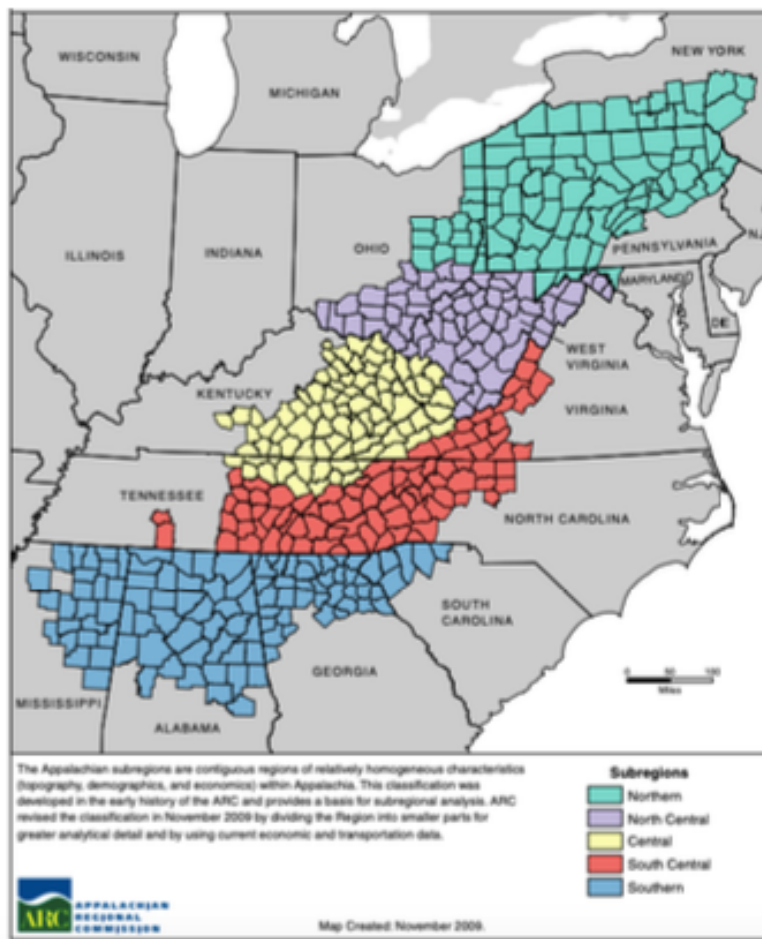


Figure 4: Appalachian Subregions (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2009).

⁴⁰ Kelvin Pollard and Linda A. Jacobsen, “The Appalachian Region: A Data Overview from the 2013-2017 American Community Survey Chartbook,” (Washington, DC: Appalachian Regional Commission, 2019)

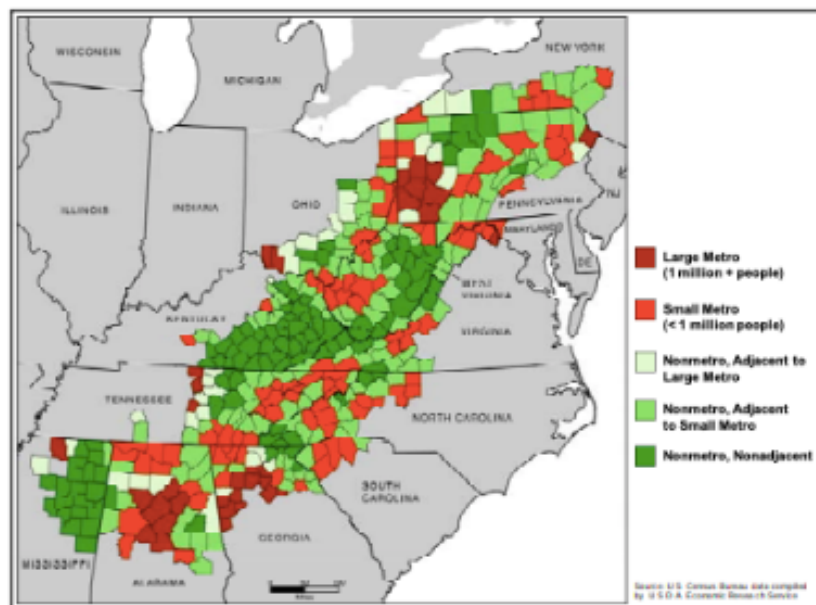


Figure 5: *Appalachian Subregions by County (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2009).*

For the purposes of this research, the main focus will be on rural poverty in Southern Appalachia. This subregion, in general terms, consists of the southernmost portion of the Appalachian region. Yarnell defines this area as “the State of West Virginia, southwestern Virginia, eastern Kentucky and Tennessee, western North Carolina and South Carolina, Northern Georgia, and northeastern Alabama.”⁴¹ The vast majority of the counties in this area are rural, which provides for a unique set of causes of poverty to be examined further. The level to which a county is impoverished or struggling is categorized into one of five labels: distressed, at risk, transitional, competitive, or attainment. Distressed counties are the most economically depressed, ranking in the worst 10 percent of the nation’s counties; at risk counties are on the edge of becoming economically depressed; transitional are those which are moving between strong and weak economies; competitive counties can compete in the nation’s economies, but are not in the

⁴¹ Susan Yarnell, “The Southern Appalachians: A History of the Landscape,” (Durham, North Carolina: *Forest History Society*, 1998), 1.

highest 10 percent nationally; and attainment counties are in the highest 10 percent of all of the nation.⁴²

The different levels of poverty vary significantly county by county, often reflecting their level of rurality, resources, economic structure, or other factors. There is a distinct pocket of distressed counties primarily in the eastern portion of Kentucky, and other county labels are dispersed throughout the region. It is no surprise that Appalachian Kentucky, one of the more rural and distressed states, has the highest rate of poverty out of all of the Appalachian states, being 25.7 percent. This can be compared to the rate of poverty in the Appalachian region as a whole, 16.3 percent and the United States poverty rate, 14.6 percent. The lowest rate of poverty in Appalachia is 13.3 percent, found in the state of Pennsylvania.⁴³

The Appalachian region's geographic makeup has, for centuries, caused the residents of the region to be physically isolated. The mountains serve as an ever-present and literal barrier to the nation surrounding it. Beyond geographical barriers, people living in the Appalachian region have often been trapped within their own social structures and inhibited by their political or institutional framework.

Background

The Appalachian region is a widely recognized subregion of the United States, but is frequently referred to with misinformation or generalizations. Much of the dialogue surrounding Appalachia indicates that the area is white, poor, rural, and sparsely populated. This generalized representation of the Appalachian region holds some truth, but requires further examination to get the clearest picture of what Appalachia truly is. To give some general statistics, there are

⁴² “Distressed Designation and County Economic Status Classification System, FY 2007 – FY 2020,” (Washington, DC: *Appalachian Regional Commission*, n.d.)

⁴³ “County Economic Status, Fiscal Year 2020,” (Washington, DC: *Appalachian Regional Commission*, n.d.)

more than 25 million people living in the entire region, which can be further broken down as predominantly rural. There are 18.6 percent minority persons, compared with the national proportion of 39.3 percent, and the area has an older population than the national average, with 17.9 percent above 65 years old compared to the United States population above 65 at 15.6 percent.⁴⁴

History Into Present Day

Spanning back to the 1800's, the inhabitants of the region or the "mountaineers," a nickname coined to represent individuals living in the region, modestly lived off of their land by farming, hunting, and occasional trading. Following the end of the Civil War, the Appalachian region gained more attention from outsiders, being valued for its timber, coal, and other natural resources.⁴⁵ This industrialized the region, allowing for an influx of jobs that were appealing to the people living there who had the uncertain living of agriculture-based work rather than in a factory. This work structure, while appealing in the short term, as it allowed for the prospect of necessary short-term income, led to an unpredictable and oppressive system. Many of the people and companies in charge were able to monopolize and control the more prominent industries, creating a lack of control for many low-wage workers.

The wealthier outsiders who entered the region took over the industries, creating a narrow opening for jobs with a steady income, which were desired by a wide array of individuals. This created an employment structure where only a few individuals and families have power. Duncan (1992) explained how this system is subject to nepotism by saying that:

Limited opportunity for steady work and income means that control over jobs is a source of wealth and power. Jobs are a kind of currency. Private employers give jobs to family members, friends, and, frequently, political supporters. The valuable, steady public-sector jobs and, in some instances, the benefits and opportunities

⁴⁴ Pollard and Jacobsen, "The Appalachian Region," (2019).

⁴⁵ Cynthia M. Duncan, *Rural Poverty in America*, (New York, New York: Auburn House, 1992), 217.

available through welfare programs are part of an entrenched patronage-driven political system. In many Appalachian communities a few powerful families have control over most of the desirable opportunities in the private and public sectors.⁴⁶

These social structures are still largely in effect today, among other issues. The Appalachian region in the present day has been stereotyped by the negatively connotated nickname of “hillbillies.” The United States as a whole has represented the Appalachian region as rural, impoverished, and predominantly white.

More recently, the economy in Appalachia has adapted, growing in some areas and declining in others. Traditional industries such as coal and wood manufacturing have structural flaws and global competition, so they are in decline. Coal manufacturing is one of the industries that is frequently associated with the region, especially in Southern Appalachia. However, it is a very unstable market, as exports are in decline worldwide. The supply of coal once was abundant in many Southern Appalachian counties, serving as one of their main exports and catalysts of income. However, now there is a lack of demand as the nation is increasingly utilizing and manufacturing other energy sources.⁴⁷ The region has maintained severe job losses and economic change, which has been harmful to its inhabitants. There has been a steady job decline in manufacturing, utilities, farming, and natural resource industries, but growth in health, education, professional services, and construction. However, even the job sectors which have grown have increased at a slower level than the national average.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid, 111.

⁴⁷ Rupert Bayless Vance and Thomas R. Ford, *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015)

⁴⁸ David Carrier, Carolyn Kluck, Robert Gibbs, James Jacobs, Dale King, Robert Lueckel, Dennis May, Tommie Parham, and Kevin Wickey, “Economic Assessment of Appalachia: An Appalachian Regional Development Initiative Report,” (Washington, DC: *Appalachian Regional Commission*, June 2010).

Current Barriers

The Appalachian region, as a whole, ranks below the national average in several quality of life measures. As previously addressed, the level to which the county compares to the national average varies, especially considering how some areas have diversified their economies allowing to improve their surroundings. However, many counties in the region remain isolated, urgently needing improvements to basic infrastructures. The Appalachian region faces many unique challenges such as an aging population, below average educational attainment, below average income, lack of access to affordable healthcare, and rurality of the area.

The aging population in Appalachia is presently a challenge of the region and signals more issues to come. Currently, the number of residents in the area over the age of 65 exceeds the national average, and the number of individuals in their “prime working years,” meaning ages 25 to 64, declined in recent years, whereas it grew on a national level. Older people made up at least 20 percent of the population in 157 of 420 Appalachian counties, and nearly 3/4 of those counties were in rural areas.⁴⁹ This shift in ages of the Appalachian residents means that there are and will continue to be fewer people who are able and willing to work, causing inadequate support for the local tax base, availability of community services, and overall economic prosperity and structure.

Educational attainment is also much lower in comparison with the nation as a whole. This is a crucial factor, as educational attainment can raise productivity, increase lifetime earnings, reduce the risk of poverty, and help with many other measures of well-being. In Appalachia, the number of adults over 25 years old who have a college degree is only 2/3 of the national average,

⁴⁹ Kevin M. Pollard and Linda A Jacobsen, “Appalachia's Aging Population-More Residents Ages 65, Fewer Ages 25 to 64-Signals Challenges Ahead,” (Washington, DC: *Population Reference Bureau*, 2018).

and this gap is widening still.⁵⁰ This is largely because college graduates do not tend to settle in or return to the Appalachian region, and there is an overall lower rate of college attendance in the area.⁵¹ Central and Southern Appalachia have much lower rates of educational attainment in comparison to the Northern subregion.

Healthcare is another huge challenge that Appalachian people face. The region has historically, and still to the present day, had higher rates of serious diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and more when compared to the national average. The region also has higher mortality rates than the rest of the nation, with the exception of the Northernmost subregion. Disability is also a huge health factor that differentiates the Appalachian region from the rest of the United States. The proportion of Appalachians age 21 to 64 with a disability was 21.3 percent in 2000, compared with 19.2 percent for the United States.⁵² Individuals who are disabled are typically inhibited in the number of and kinds of jobs that they can perform, and often require publicly provided services that can put a strain on their economy, and a massive strain on the individual with a disability who does not have access to these services.

Conclusion

The Appalachian region, when compared to the nation surrounding it, has a unique and severe set of issues that are restricting its inhabitants. These problems are found on an individual and structural level and have been pervasive throughout the history of the region. The term “hillbilly,” by which Appalachian inhabitants are often stereotyped, provides a glimpse into how the region is, and has historically been, represented in the United States society, government institutions, and policies. The picture that is often portrayed of the region includes white, poor

⁵⁰ Carrier, et al, “Economic Assessment of Appalachia” (2010)

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

men working in mines or other physically laboring jobs. While this portrayal of the region does maintain some validity, there are millions of women and minorities who have their own particular subset of issues, especially the ways in which they are impacted by poverty. The issues faced by Appalachian inhabitants have been historically ignored or overshadowed by the rest of the nation, which reinforces the serious and chronic problem the region is facing. Of course, this chapter does not provide for a completely detailed description of the history and current economic and social climate in Appalachia. Rather, it is intended to set the framework and background on the region to be further elaborated on in the more specific context of how women living in rural Appalachia are impacted by inequality and poverty.

Chapter Three: Rural Poverty in Appalachia

The rurality of the Appalachian region plays a significant role in how extreme its poverty levels are, as well as what kind of poverty the area faces. Poverty is more severe in rural or nonmetropolitan areas in comparison to urban or metropolitan areas. However, much of the policy research on poverty is aimed towards urban poverty, which can cause individuals living in rural poverty to be perceived as “the invisible poor.”⁵³ While the Appalachian region as a whole is not entirely rural, the majority of its counties are, which plays a significant role in measuring poverty and determining its causes. This is especially prominent when examining Appalachian subregions, with Central and Southern Appalachia having higher rates of rural counties. States such as Kentucky and Mississippi face extreme rural poverty, whereas in the state of Pennsylvania, more of the population lives in non-rural counties.

Rural areas tend to struggle economically because of low population density and a less-developed economic sector.⁵⁴ This reasoning can be broken down further into occupational and industrial segregation, lack of employment diversity, and the extent of employer power. McLaughlin and Perman (1991) defined these terms as “the extent of the isolation from white men experienced by women and minority workers by occupation and/or industry,” “the number and variety of jobs in a labor market,” and “the amount of control a particular industry or firm has in decision making about wages and hiring practices,” respectively.⁵⁵ The trend of rural areas facing more common and severe poverty than urban areas is not unique to the Appalachian region; this trend is seen in the United States as a whole, and holds true to the modern day. The

⁵³ Melissa Latimer and Ann Oberhauser, “Exploring Gender and Economic Development in Appalachia,” (*Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 10 (3), 2004), 269.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 271.

⁵⁵ Diane K McLaughlin and Lauri Perman, “Returns vs. Endowments in the Earnings Attainment Process for Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Men and Women,” (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, *Rural Sociology* 56, no. 3, 1991), 340.

gap between urban and rural poverty has narrowed over time, largely due to urbanization of certain areas or improvements in local rural infrastructure. The gap in poverty rates between urban and rural residences, as of 2017, is 3.5%.⁵⁶ Areas with high poverty rates tend to reflect the lower income of racial and ethnic minorities. Within every racial bracket, there is a higher percentage of poor individuals in rural regions than in urban regions. The most significant proportion of urban poverty is for black individuals, at a rate of 32 percent. The lowest proportion of rural poverty is for white, non-Hispanic individuals with a rate of 13.5 percent.⁵⁷ These findings follow the national trend of higher levels of poverty rates for racial minorities than white individuals, representing the pervasiveness of racial income inequality in the United States.

Other factors that contribute to rural poverty are lack of transportation, childcare services, and other services that are more widely available in urban areas.⁵⁸ The limits on these public services are a common barrier to employment for people living in rural areas. Even when a service, such as public transportation, is available, it frequently has a higher cost per person than it would in an urban area. Without transportation, people are quite literally stuck in one place, severely limiting their work opportunities. This is similar to access to childcare, as without affordable childcare, parents, and especially women, will be stuck at home caring for their children. The rurality of Appalachia poses a unique set of challenges for women in particular, often limiting their scope of employment and overall prosperity.

⁵⁶ “Rural Poverty & Well-Being,” (Washington, DC: *United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service*. USDA, n.d.).

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Latimer and Oberhauser, *Exploring Gender* (2004), 287.

Chapter Four: Female Poverty in Appalachia

Appalachian women, like women in the United States, are more susceptible to lower income and poverty in general. As discussed in the previous chapters, there are many reasons for this, having to do with societal norms, structural and institutional inequalities, and blatant discrimination on the basis of sex, with exacerbated discrimination towards women of color and women in the LGBTQ+ community. The feminization of poverty in Appalachia differs from the United States as a whole because of its rural climate, lack of economic opportunity, low educational attainment, and responsibility of motherhood and childcare. While there is some overlap between the causes of and problems associated with female poverty in Appalachia with female poverty in the United States, this chapter will provide for a more detailed analysis of marginalized Appalachian women, specifically in rural areas.

Female Stereotyping in Appalachia

This section is not intended to perpetuate the perception of females as inferior or trapped within the confines of homemaking or other typical “female” characteristics, which is frequently associated with women in the Appalachian region and beyond. The presentation of women in Appalachia, and the region as a whole, by popular culture has led to a wide array of misinformation and overall misrepresentation of Appalachia.⁵⁹ The region is associated with the male coal miner, often ignoring the importance of women in the Appalachian economy and beyond. When women in the region are recognized, they are often portrayed as insignificant homemakers, overly ‘masculine,’ or hyper-sexualized in the media.⁶⁰ The television series *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Hee Haw*, and *Dukes of Hazzard* are just a few examples of mass media

⁵⁹ Michelle D. Kegley, “Socio-Economic Stability and Independence of Appalachian Women,” (Los Angeles, California: *Antioch University*, December 2011), 29-30.

⁶⁰ Carissa Massey, “Appalachian Stereotypes: Cultural History, Gender, and Sexual Rhetoric,” (*Journal of Appalachian Studies* 13, 2007), 132.

outlets that have reinforced the negative stereotypes associated with the Appalachian region and women living there. As Kegley (2011) puts it, these provide:

Images of Appalachian women to people who have never been to the area or met anyone from the area, reinforcing the idea of either aggressive craggy old women with no man in their lives or young sexually promiscuous, gullible women looking for a man to marry and take care of them financially. These types of media portrayals serve to legitimize a view of Appalachian women that assumes they desire and deserve their marginalized circumstances. This also perpetuates an image that Appalachian families are led by a man as the head of household because the stereotypical woman would not be able to handle such significant responsibility.⁶¹

This is not to say that men in the region are not also poorly portrayed in the media; there is still the problematic ‘hillbilly’ association tied to men in Appalachia. However, the negative stereotype of an Appalachian man is not solely associated with males. Rather, women share the negative perceptions of the ‘hillbilly’ lifestyle, with the additional stereotyping unique to their womanhood.

When women take a more significant role in the workforce or labor-intensive tasks, they are considered to be “aggressive, overly fecund, and masculine,” while maintaining the ‘hillbilly’ ignorance they share with their male counterparts.⁶² On the other hand, women in Appalachia are often overly sexualized and shamed for promiscuity. This other perspective of the Appalachian woman aligns with the image of Daisy Duke, from the aforementioned *Dukes of Hazzard*, who has been characterized by her cut-off denim shorts and position as a sex symbol, whose role was to appease the sexual desires of the males surrounding her. This feeds into the stereotype of Appalachian women who are portrayed as seeking out a man to take care of them financially through sexual promiscuity.⁶³

⁶¹ Kegley, “Socio-Economic Stability,” (2011), 31.

⁶² Massey, “Appalachian Stereotypes,” (2007), 130.

⁶³ Kegley, “Socio-Economic Stability,” (2011), 31.

Beyond the portrayal of Appalachia through the lense of gendered stereotypes, the region is also widely understood to be almost entirely white, heterosexual, and politically conservative. As Kegley (2011) points out, this description is also true in describing the United States, which poses the question of why the Appalachian region tends to be whitewashed in American society. It is true that the minority population in Appalachia is lower than in the nation. However, there has been significant growth in the minority population in Appalachia. From 1990 to 2000, half of the population growth in Appalachia was from racial or ethnic minorities. This boosted minorities' proportion in the region to 22.9 million people, or 12 percent. The rate of increase for Appalachia's minority population was greater than the 43 percent increase of minorities in the rest of the country.⁶⁴ It is important to recognize the increasing diversity in the Appalachian region in terms of general stereotyping, and more specifically to this research, to discuss the status of women of color in Appalachia. Racial and ethnic minority women in Appalachia are a segment of research that is noticeably absent in many research journals and datasets but can hopefully be further examined through this research.

Economic Barriers

Aside from the stereotyping and perceptions of Appalachian women in society at large, there are barriers for women specific to the region in terms of employment, education, and child-rearing. This research will focus primarily on the barriers specific to women living in rural Appalachia, as the region is predominantly rural, and that creates a unique set of barriers. There is persistent gendered segmentation in the workforce in Appalachia, which has set the framework for women's marginalized socio-economic status.⁶⁵ There have been improvements in the

⁶⁴ Kelvin M. Pollard, "A "new diversity": Race and ethnicity in the Appalachian region. Report on demographic and socioeconomic change in Appalachia," (Washington, DC: *Appalachian Regional Commission*, 2004), 6.

⁶⁵ Lauren Hayes, "Mobile and Temporary: Women and Workplace Precarity in Appalachian Kentucky," (*Journal of Appalachian Studies* 24, no. 1, 2018), 26.

number of women in the workforce, but the figure still is much lower in comparison to the male workforce, especially when considering the difference in the typical fields of work for men and women.

Women's jobs in Appalachia typically are in the secondary, lower-paying work sector, consisting of occupations in the service economy, such as retail, restaurant, hospitality, and more recently, manufacturing jobs.⁶⁶ These positions are not only low paying, but in low abundance in the rural communities where many Appalachian people reside. In small, rural Appalachian areas, there is little opportunity for these positions, as in many towns there could only be a handful of retail stores or gas stations to employ its inhabitants, often causing higher rates of unemployment and ultimately a greater strain on rural Appalachian communities. Take manufacturing jobs, for example. Large corporations are more frequently clustering factories and job opportunities in urban areas in the outskirts of the Appalachian region,⁶⁷ causing many job-seeking individuals to be faced with the choice of a long commute or relocation to a more job-abundant city.

Commuting to work is a challenge and inconvenience for many people, although it can have a positive effect, as it serves as a link between rural and urban communities and gives working people flexibility in where they want to live and raise their family.⁶⁸ But, in most cases, commuting is a burden because of the nonexistent public transportation system and costliness of owning and maintaining a personal vehicle. Public transportation, especially in rural areas, is lacking in Appalachia. In 2000, only 1 percent of workers in Appalachia took public transportation to work.⁶⁹ This means the vast majority of people in the region rely on personal

⁶⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 32.

⁶⁸ Mark Mather, "Housing and Commuting Patterns in Appalachia," (*Population Reference Bureau*, January 2004), 28.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 14.

vehicles to commute to work. Buying and owning a vehicle is costly, especially for low-income individuals and families given the cost of fuel, maintenance, insurance, parking, tolls, etc.

Despite the cost, the majority of households in Appalachia do have a personal vehicle, as it is essentially a necessity for employment, and often bridging the gap from welfare to a self-sustaining income. It is no surprise that the proportion of households without access to a personal vehicle are highest in the distressed counties.⁷⁰

The prospect of relocation, most likely to an urban area with more opportunity in manufacturing or other similar positions with low wages and entry-level work, is daunting and unrealistic for many Appalachian people. This narrowed opportunity is more frequently placed upon women, as their field of work is in these sectors and they more often have childcare and family lives to balance.⁷¹ Relocation is very costly, and frequently not justified given the instability of these kinds of positions. There is high turnover in this job sector, due to layoffs, individuals leaving to seek higher pay, unexpected changes in shift scheduling, responsibility for childcare, and the search for less physically demanding jobs.⁷² Further, in the post-recession economy, manufacturing jobs, and other similar work, are becoming increasingly temporary and contracted. Many corporations strategically hire temporary workers during their busiest season, often around the holidays, to be let go once they are no longer needed, allowing the corporation to maintain a flexible workforce that suits their needs and optimizing profits. In the United States as a whole, 35 workers are hired for temporary or contract positions for every 100 workers hired directly for permanent positions. This occurs in Appalachia as well.⁷³ Beyond the instability of

⁷⁰ Ibid, 23.

⁷¹ Hayes, "Mobile and Temporary," (2018), 34.

⁷² Ibid, 34.

⁷³ Ibid, 32-33.

temporary positions, these also are lower paying and are often not eligible for benefits.⁷⁴ Given the characteristics of this job sector, it is illogical for people in rural Appalachia to relocate.

Within these blue-collar jobs, the skills required are gendered and can impact hiring practices. Since this job market typically contains physically demanding jobs, men are typically deemed better suited.⁷⁵ Women, on the other hand, tend to be hired for their “nimble fingers,”⁷⁶ promoting their employment in factory work, primarily focusing on tasks with sewing, assembly lines, or other clerical work. The overrepresentation of females in those positions causes women to face higher levels of shift reorganization and other factors leading to more insecure work.⁷⁷ In manufacturing jobs in particular, outside of the ‘typical’ female jobs, women lack seniority and hierarchical power, as the industry has historically been dominated by males. When “male work culture” is permeated by females, they are more likely to face gender discrimination and harassment, with women of color facing more severe and frequent harassment by their white and male counterparts.⁷⁸

The segmentation in the workforce, among other factors, has impacts on women’s earnings in Appalachia. In West Virginia, a prime example of a predominantly rural, Central Appalachian state, women earn approximately 74 cents for every dollar a man makes, which is even lower than the United States average of 80 cents on the dollar. At this rate, women in West Virginia will not receive equal pay until 2099.⁷⁹ This discrepancy in earnings between men and

⁷⁴ Ibid, 32.

⁷⁵ Kegley, “Socio-Economic Stability,” (2011), 23.

⁷⁶ Lisa Rofel, *Other modernities: Gendered yearnings in China after socialism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 247.

⁷⁷ Hayes, “Mobile and Temporary”, (2018), 37.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 38.

⁷⁹ “West Virginia State Data,” (Washington, DC: *Status of Women in the States*, n.d.).

women in West Virginia, and the Appalachian region as a whole is a result of women working fewer hours, to be elaborated on later, and having low levels of educational attainment.⁸⁰

This has largely restricted women from the mainstream job market, and without a higher education, it is difficult to transition into higher-level roles. Appalachia falls behind the nation in terms of educational attainment, although the region has seen improvement in recent years. As of 2017, 25.3 percent of adults aged 25 to 64 in Appalachia hold a bachelor's degree, in comparison to the national proportion of 32.3 percent.⁸¹ This, like many regional data, differs when broken down into Appalachian subregions, with the highest proportion of bachelor's degrees in Northern Appalachia and the lowest proportion in Central Appalachia. Access to lower levels of education, such as an associate's degree or high school diploma, also follows this trend of higher proportions in Northern Appalachia and lower in the Central region, with more rural counties having lower educational attainment.⁸² Interestingly, gender is not a large source of disparity in terms of educational attainment in Appalachia, as both men and women, have low rates of education.⁸³ However, the lower than average level of educational attainment in Appalachia is more problematic for women in particular because of the historically unstable nature of service-oriented occupations. With higher educational attainment, females would be better equipped to find employment in higher paying and more stable occupations.

Motherhood, Childcare, and Family Planning Services

Pregnancy, motherhood, and childcare also serve as significant factors that destabilize women's employment in Appalachia. This can be seen in female-headed, single parent

⁸⁰ Latimer and Oberhauser, *Exploring Gender* (2004), 279.

⁸¹ Kelvin Pollard, and Linda A. Jacobsen, "The Appalachian Region," (2018).

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Thomas Shaw, Allan DeYoung, and Eric Rademacher, "Educational Attainment in Appalachia: Growing with the Nation, But Challenges Remain," (Washington, DC: *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 10, no. 3, 2004), 17-18.

households and in two heterosexual parent households, for different reasons. Appalachia differs from the rest of the United States, as the region has a slightly higher share of married heterosexual couple households.⁸⁴ A dual income household with children requires that there is an affordable and reliable childcare center nearby, a family relative or friend to care for children while the parents are at work, or a flexible work schedule that allows for one parent to be home at a time. In rural Appalachia, childcare centers are scarce and often unaffordable for poor families, and when they are present, often the quality of care is problematic because there are fewer skilled childcare workers in the area.⁸⁵ With limited childcare resources and typically inflexible work schedules for blue-collar occupations, families tend to rely on either relatives or friends to care for their children while the parents are at work, or more frequently, mothers are expected to work less to care for their children, inhibiting female participation in the labor force.⁸⁶ These gender norms are pervasive for Appalachian women, which restricts their ability to work and maintain economic independence.

Female-headed households face more hardship, as there is a singular income and often these households do not have access to the same economic or human resources as married couples.⁸⁷ “Female-headed” does not mean with children, although many female-headed households consist of single mothers. Female-headed households does not equate a woman alone in the household, though. Frequently women in these cases are caring for elderly parents or other relatives. In Appalachia, there are approximately one million female-headed households, which makes up 16 percent of households in the region. This proportion is slightly lower than the United States’ average, as it is more common for households to consist of a heterosexual,

⁸⁴ Mark Mather, “Households and Families in Appalachia,” (*Population Reference Bureau*, May 2004), 4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

married couple.⁸⁸ It is consistent nationwide that rural areas are less likely to have female-headed households, so Appalachia is no different. Out of all single-parent households in Appalachia, almost 80% are female-headed. The majority of female-headed households in the Appalachian region are in the southern subregion, with the highest proportions in Alabama and Mississippi, and especially frequent for black women. Children living in a female-headed household in a rural region face more pervasive poverty; 80 percent of poor children in rural areas in female-headed households remain poor for 3 more years, as compared to 47 percent of poor children in an urban area.⁸⁹ Female-headed households are the fastest growing household demographic in Appalachia, but poverty rates in the region remain the highest among female-headed households,⁹⁰ pointing to a need for stronger support, both policy-based and in the community, for single women and mothers.

Another prominent concern facing women in rural Appalachia is access to reliable birth control and abortions. Many of the states in the region, especially the Central and southern subregions, have historically restricted and presently restrict offering family planning services. Birth control is a crucial medication that serves as a preventative measure to pregnancy, in addition to helping alleviate other medical or personal concerns such as inconsistent menstrual cycles, severe cramping, acne, and more. Access to safe abortions is another key component in family planning healthcare. Abortions are important to ensure women's bodily autonomy and independence, as well as allowing for women to be unrestricted by an unwanted pregnancy due to the financial and personal burden it entails.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 16.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 37.

Rural women do not have as much access to abortion services as women in urban areas, largely due to the lack of medical care centers and clinics in the area, and a lack of education surrounding the topic of abortion.⁹¹ The presence of services, including information and education regarding abortion procedures, trustworthy medical professionals, one's proximity to a medical care center or clinic that provides abortions, and the funds and/or insurance to cover the abortion, make the pathway either more or less challenging depending on one's circumstances. O'Donnell et al. (2018) found that, in rural, Central Appalachia, "the perceived deviance of having an abortion, and misinformation about the medical safety of abortion, promotes the unacceptability of terminating a pregnancy. Strong community norms of parenting children resulting from unwanted pregnancies promote the acceptability of continuing a pregnancy," and further that "decision-making around unwanted pregnancy is also heavily influenced by the perceived feasibility of obtaining abortion services."⁹² The lack of access to and knowledge of abortions in rural Appalachia is causing many women in the region to have limited options when facing an unexpected or unwanted pregnancy, which can have detrimental effects on the woman's well-being, both for her economic future and personal life.

Conclusion

There are a wide variety of concerns regarding women's relationship with poverty and inequality in Appalachia, especially for women living in rural counties. These issues span from the individual level up to structural and policy-oriented concerns, ranging from individual women being inhibited by access to health care services or a reliable childcare provider to the region facing the concerns of economic instability and a segmented workforce on the basis of

⁹¹ Jenny O'Donnell, Alisa Goldberg, Ellice Lieberman, and Theresa Betancourt, "*I wouldn't even know where to start*": unwanted pregnancy and abortion decision-making in Central Appalachia. (Boston, Massachusetts, Reproductive Health Matters 26:54, 2018), 109.

⁹² Ibid, 109-110.

gender. All of these concerns have culminated over centuries to create a complex system that is often unsupportive of females' concerns, reflective of the inequalities present on a national scale, and exacerbated by the rurality of the region.

Chapter Five: Policy Analysis

The various issues in Appalachia faced by women and the general population are complex and multifaceted, requiring strong and strategic legislation and policy-based action. There has been, and currently are, a multitude of policies aimed towards alleviating the problems in the region, problems that are present on national and local levels. The majority of legislation has been enacted with positive intent, but the remaining pervasive poverty and severe inequalities in the region points to how policy-based action in Appalachia has largely been inefficient and misguided. This is not to say that all women, or all people for that matter, in Appalachia are living in poverty. Of course, there are women in the region who are economically stable and thriving. However, this chapter, like the previously discussed research and history of the region, is specifically intended to point out the issues and options at hand for low-income women living in rural Appalachia. This chapter will provide for a closer analysis of legislation in the Appalachian region, point out the gaps in policy, and suggest policy-based solutions to the problems facing the region.

The War on Poverty

One of the most well-known legislative initiatives affecting Appalachia is the War on Poverty, which was proposed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. As President Johnson said, this legislation was created to “create an unconditional war on poverty,” aimed around eradicating poverty nationwide. At the time, the national rate of poverty was at almost 20%,⁹³ but this proportion was dispersed differently throughout the nation. The War on Poverty introduced legislation that is still relevant to American politics today, such as Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start and food stamps. President Johnson envisioned a “Great Society,” which included a wide

⁹³ Molly Moore, *Appalachia's Place in the War on Poverty*, (Boone, North Carolina: The Appalachian Voice, 2014).

array of domestic policies and had the aim, just like the War on Poverty, to eradicate poverty in the United States.

There were additional regional emphases within the War on Poverty, with Appalachia being a primary point of aimed impact. In the 1960's, the region was facing extreme rates of poverty; the poverty rate in Central Appalachia was 59.4 percent, with the Northern and Southern regions being close but not as extreme.⁹⁴ In Appalachia as a whole, one of every three residents lived in poverty, per capita income was 23 percent lower than the United States average, and over 2 million people had relocated to seek work in other areas because of high unemployment rates and overall economic instability.⁹⁵

To address this extreme rate of poverty in Appalachia, President Johnson took personal measures by visiting rural Kentucky, being famously photographed on the front porches of local families discussing their concerns. Following the pressure from governors in Appalachian states, more specific legislation was enacted to create change in the region. One of the most prominent acts from the War on Poverty's impact on Appalachia is the Appalachian Regional Development Act. This act created the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), which is still in place today.

The ARC was:

Tasked with overseeing the development of programs aimed at facilitating economic development in Appalachia as well as the construction of the Appalachian Highway Development System (AHDS), a network of more than 3,500 miles of new highways designed to connect previously isolated Appalachian communities with larger national markets.⁹⁶

This aimed to create a more cohesive management system for the economic programs in Appalachia, as well as to construct more reliable and accessible transportation resources to

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ "ARC History," (Washington, DC: *Appalachian Regional Commission*, n.d.).

⁹⁶ Ibid

connect Appalachia to the rest of the nation. Funds were invested in education, job training, and transportation infrastructure, but most of the money flowed into urban areas rather than the highly distressed rural counties.⁹⁷

The War on Poverty and subsequent legislation aimed towards Appalachia played a pivotal role in increasing the country's awareness of the poverty-stricken Appalachian region, and efforts to promote economic development and employment. The anti-poverty messaging placed an important spotlight on Appalachia, allowing the region to finally be recognized by the federal government after decades of exploitation and overshadowing. The program was relatively successful, considering the poverty rate reduction and foundation of domestic programs that have transitioned into the modern day. The War on Poverty is often thought of as a complete failure and waste of trillions of United States' dollars.⁹⁸ That is an unfair assumption given the impact the legislation has had, as it is still being discussed over 50 years later. From the findings on the War on Poverty from a recent Columbia University study:

The most noticeable trend is that the gap between before-government and after-government poverty just keeps growing. In fact, without government programs, poverty would have actually increased over the period in question. Government action is literally the only reason we have less poverty in 2012 than we did in 1967. What's more, we can directly attribute this to programs created or expanded during the war on poverty.⁹⁹

Clearly, there has been significant progress as a result of the War on Poverty, but that progress is often devalued given the original premise of the War on Poverty, which was to declare an “unconditional war” that would relieve, cure, and prevent the symptoms of poverty.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Moore, “Appalachia's Place in the War on Poverty.”

⁹⁸ Sarah D. Sparks, “50 Years Later, Verdicts Are Mixed on the Nation's War on Poverty,” (Bethesda, Maryland: *Education Week*, January, 2014).

⁹⁹ Dylan Matthews, “Everything You Need to Know about the War on Poverty,” (Washington, DC: *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

However, poverty has not been eradicated in the United States, and especially not the Appalachian region. The War on Poverty, and much of the subsequent legislation, has been inefficient in addressing the Appalachian region's needs, especially for the women living in the area. The federal government, as well as state and local governments in the Appalachian region have a responsibility to address these concerns in the present day. The following section will give a closer analysis of legislation that has recently been enacted and is currently in place impacting women in the Appalachian region, as well as what problems are being unaddressed by the federal, state, and local governments.

Current Legislation

Many acts and laws are in place that impact the Appalachian region—far too many to address in this research alone. Much of the legislation that was created under the premise of the “Great Society” is still active today, such as these widely well-known programs, Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, food stamps, and more.¹⁰¹ These programs, often referred to as welfare, are beneficial for the Appalachian region, especially low-income residents, families, and female-headed households. Government assistance is prevalent in Appalachia; five Appalachian states are among the 10 nationwide states most dependent on federal funding. To take a look at some of the Appalachian states, West Virginia receives 26.2 percent of its annual income from federal government programs, Mississippi 24 percent, Kentucky 22.4 percent, and Alabama 21.8 percent.¹⁰² Clearly, a large portion of the Appalachian region is supplemented by government assistance, which commonly perpetuates the culture of poverty theory.

This individualized theory suggests that government assistance programs perpetuate the culture of poverty, causing impoverished individuals to use the government funded handouts to

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² “Appalachia Today: Part 10 – Government Entitlements,” (*Galloway Family Foundation*, December 28, 2017).

remain in a dependent cycle of poverty. This research rejects that interpretation, specifically pertaining to women living in rural poverty in Appalachia, with the understanding that the lack of institutions, infrastructure, resources, job flexibility, and more of the barriers that have been addressed in the region are not sufficient to allow individuals to lift themselves out of poverty. Eller (1998) describes the inaccuracy of the individual theory, and ‘culture of poverty’, by explaining that:

It's been too easy over the years to apply the term "culture of poverty" to a group of people in Appalachia as it has been applied to lots of other groups of people across the country in other kinds of settings. In many ways, the true culture of poverty, if it exists in the Region, may in fact be the attitudes and values of those that make the decisions about access to economic opportunity.¹⁰³

Cultural poverty blames the individual rather than a person’s surroundings, and specific to women’s relationship with rural poverty in Appalachia, it is an unfair assumption, given the lack of resources and gendered segmentation in the region, which serve as barriers to self-sufficiency.

Since there is such a wide variety in legislation and other government-related actions occurring in Appalachia on a federal, state-wide, and local level, the following section will analyze 3 more specific policies: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid Expansion in the context of the Affordable Care Act, and the closures of abortion clinics throughout the region. While this does not cover every possible aspect of legislation in Appalachia, it will allow for a glimpse into the legislation impacting the Appalachian region.

Government-funded Assistance and SNAP Benefits

There has been a reduction in government assistance and welfare programs in many of the Appalachian states, largely enacted by state governments in hopes of reducing the number of “handouts” that are being allotted and to prevent dependency on welfare. One of the more

¹⁰³ “A Conversation on Distressed Counties,” (Washington, DC: *Appalachian Regional Commission*, 1981).

commonly utilized welfare programs in Appalachia is SNAP, otherwise commonly referred to as food stamps. It is a program that has been restricted for many recipients due to changes in federal legislation and various state-by-state policies. For example, in West Virginia, as of January 2016, prospective recipients must fulfil a work requirement of 20 hours per week or be enrolled in a work or education-related training program in order to continue receiving food assistance after 3 months. However, many of the already narrow amount of jobs available in the rural areas of West Virginia are offered only for part time positions, which does not meet the 20-hour requirement. This requirement is especially challenging for single mothers, as it is difficult to balance work and childcare with very few to no affordable and accessible childcare centers.

The current welfare system in Appalachia is misguided and dysfunctional and does not serve the needs of women living in rural poverty. Stripping away access to government assistance without supplemental resources and programs in place causes impoverished women to remain poor. This is specifically a characteristic of rural Appalachia because of the lack of job opportunities, transportation, childcare, and the other previously discussed barriers to self-sufficiency. As Henderson and Tickamyer (2008) explain it:

In rural regions it is difficult to transition from public assistance into the labor market because of a lack of employment opportunities and social/human capital to facilitate this transition. Furthermore, in contrast to their urban counterparts, those attempting to meet welfare reform mandates and make ends meet in isolated rural locations often experience an absolute lack of necessary resources such as economic means, childcare, transportation, health care, and housing to successfully achieve their goals. Overall, welfare recipients in rural locales experience different constraints than do urban recipients and as a result, impoverished rural women are often worse off than their urban counterparts.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Debra A. Henderson and Ann R Tickamyer, “Lost in Appalachia: The Unexpected Impact of Welfare Reform on Older Women in Rural Communities,” (Athens, Ohio: *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 35, no. 3, 2008), 155–156.

This speaks to the need for stronger efforts in Appalachia to provide a foundation of support for women that allows for employment, flexibility, and overall economic and personal opportunity.

Medicaid Expansion

Healthcare access and affordability is another significant issue in Appalachia, especially in rural counties. Following the passing of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), often referred to as Obamacare, in 2010, many states followed the act's guidelines and expanded Medicaid. The ACA, in simple terms, was intended to provide health insurance for the millions of Americans who did not have access. In order to fully function, it required states to expand Medicaid eligibility to nearly all low-income individuals, with incomes at or below 138 percent of the federal poverty line, being an income of \$17, 236 for an individual in 2019.¹⁰⁵ However, the Supreme Court decided that states could not be forced to expand Medicaid eligibility, which resulted in 14 states opting not to do so. In Appalachia, 6 out of the 13 states have not. They are Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.¹⁰⁶ Since Medicaid was not expanded in the six southernmost Appalachian states, many people in those areas do not have health insurance, falling into what is often referred to as "the coverage gap," where a person has an income too high to qualify for Medicaid, but too low to qualify for federal subsidies.

Living in the coverage gap is problematic for individuals, as it inhibits them from having access to preventative care, medications, urgent care, and more. For women in Appalachia, the lack of access raises many issues particular to them. Breast cancer screenings are one example of this, as breast cancer screening rates are higher in Appalachian states that have expanded

¹⁰⁵ Rachel Garfield, Kendal Orgera, and Anthony Damico, "The Coverage Gap: Uninsured Poor Adults in States That Do Not Expand Medicaid," (San Francisco, California: *Kaiser Family Foundation*, March 21, 2019), 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

Medicaid in comparison with non-expanded states.¹⁰⁷ This means that women in the six southernmost Appalachian states that have not expanded Medicaid are less likely to access potentially life-saving breast cancer screenings. In comparison, in Kentucky, one of the seven Appalachian states that did expand Medicaid, has seen an increase in breast cancer screenings following their expanded eligibility.¹⁰⁸ Kentucky's expansion has been associated with earlier diagnosis and somewhat improved quality of breast cancer care, pointing to one of the benefits of Medicaid expansion for women.

Medicaid expansion is not only beneficial to the individual woman, it can have significant economic impacts as well. This is especially meaningful to rural communities, as advancing rural health access and financially secure health institutions are paramount to rural economies in order to grow and retain rural businesses.¹⁰⁹ The level to which the economic development would be impacted by Medicaid expansion varies state by state and county by county, but the overall findings reflect that it would be beneficial in terms of jobs created, business activity, tax revenue, and uncompensated care savings. To take a look at the details of this, we can examine Watauga County, North Carolina, an area in the Northwest portion of North Carolina, which is within the Appalachian region. The Center for Health Policy Research estimates that not expanding Medicaid in Watauga county between 2016 and 2020 would result in 325 jobs not being created, \$144,600,000 reduction in county business activity, \$982,000 loss in county tax revenue, and a \$11,539,000 loss in uncompensated care savings.¹¹⁰ Findings are

¹⁰⁷ Nimish Valvi, Neomi Vin-Raviv, and Tomi Akinyemiju, "Medicaid Expansion and Breast Cancer Screening in Appalachia and Non-Appalachia, United States, BRFSS 2003 to 2015," (*Cancer Control: SAGE Journals*, January 2019), 6-7.

¹⁰⁸ Nicolas Ajkay, Neal Bhutiani, Bin Huang, Quan Chen, Jeffrey D. Howard, Thomas C. Tucker, Charles R. Scoggins, Kelly M. Mcmasters, and Hiram C. Polk, "Early Impact of Medicaid Expansion and Quality of Breast Cancer Care in Kentucky," (*Journal of the American College of Surgeons* ,226, no. 4, 2018), 499.

¹⁰⁹ "Medicaid Expansion: Closing the Health Insurance Gap," (Raleigh, North Carolina: *NC Rural Center*, December, 2017).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*

similar throughout the non-expanded Appalachian region, though differing county by county, with the overall consensus of Medicaid expansion being beneficial on the individual, county, and state-wide level.

Access to Family Planning Services

Another health-related issue pertaining to many states in Appalachia is access to abortions and other family planning services. Abortion access and legality is a highly polarized issue that has held great significance for decades. In recent years, abortion rights have been contested nation-wide. The growing hostility around abortion access across the country has led to very restrictive laws.

Between January 1, 2011 and July 1, 2019, states enacted 483 new abortion restrictions, and these account for nearly 40% of all abortion restrictions enacted by states in the decades since *Roe v. Wade*. Some of the most common state-level abortion restrictions are parental notification or consent requirements for minors, limitations on public funding, mandated counseling designed to dissuade individuals from obtaining an abortion, mandated waiting periods before an abortion, and unnecessary and overly burdensome regulations on abortion facilities.¹¹¹

Many of the areas in which abortion rights have begun to be stripped away are in Appalachia, primarily the Central and Southern Subregions. As discussed previously, access to safe and affordable abortions is extremely important for women's bodily autonomy, economic freedom, flexibility, and overall well-being. Abortion clinics have been closing at a rapid pace in many Appalachian states because of lost legal battles and a lack of funds, reducing the options that women have in those areas.

Abortion clinic closures have a disproportionate effect on low-income women residing in rural areas. With only a handful, and often fewer, abortion facilities in their state, rural women are often inhibited from having access to an abortion, let alone managing the cost of the

¹¹¹ "State Facts About Abortion: Kentucky," (New York, New York: *Guttmacher Institute*, September 18, 2019), 1.

procedure. Take Kentucky, for example, a state that is, and has historically been, dominated by Republican leadership. As of 2017, there are three facilities providing abortions in Kentucky, only one of which is a clinic. Given the extremely low amount of facilities in Kentucky, 99 percent of counties have no clinics providing abortions, with 82 percent of Kentucky women living in those counties.¹¹² This means that women seeking abortions are extremely limited in their options, resulting in them being required to travel far distances, often around 200 miles, to access a safe abortion procedure. With limited access to public transportation in the majority of rural areas, this is difficult for women in the area. This almost always requires transportation from a personal vehicle, which can be very costly, drastically affecting low-income women. Abortions in Kentucky are restricted for low-income women, as they are not funded by private health insurance, insurance under the ACA, or by public funding, unless deemed life endangering, or, for public funding, in the cases of rape or incest or when deemed life endangering.¹¹³

Restricting abortions is not only problematic on the premise of women's overall equality, autonomy, and overall well-being; it is extremely dangerous for their safety. Preventing access to legal abortions safely performed by a medical professional does not prevent abortions, it just prevents safe abortions. With limited access, or none at all, women seeking to terminate their pregnancy will seek out alternative methods, such as self-aborting or other unsafe, non-medically monitored methods. Limited access to abortion in Appalachia is a growing issue that needs to be addressed to increase women's well-being in the area.

¹¹² Ibid, 1.

¹¹³ Ibid, 1-2.

Take-Aways

These three examples, SNAP benefits, Medicaid eligibility expansion, and access to and affordability of abortion facilities, were not chosen to represent the entirety of policy-oriented issues facing women in Appalachia, but to highlight specific examples that represent a greater understanding of the problems at hand. These state and county-specific policies exemplify how rural women in Appalachia are differently, and often more harshly, impacted by poverty and restrictive regulations. Of course, there are many examples of other relevant policies that could be addressed but were not deemed necessary to portray the ultimate conclusion that rural, low-income women are disproportionately affected by many of these policies and structures.

Policy Suggestions

The issues facing women in rural Appalachia need to be addressed through combined actions of federal, state, and local governments. However, this issue is not as simple as implementing policies which will subsequently eradicate poverty—it requires a societal and institutional shift. This section will provide policy suggestions which, if implemented, would positively impact Appalachian women’s economic and societal well-being. The three specific policies discussed above will be briefly addressed first, followed by other examples of potential improvement in Appalachia.

The effectiveness and necessity of SNAP benefits, and other forms of government assistance programs, are often debated, with multiple conclusions being drawn. The current guidelines of the SNAP program in Appalachia, and states like West Virginia, are not functioning properly. Enhanced restrictions on necessary programs like food stamps keep the poorest people poor, rather than allowing all individuals and families to put food on the table.

The SNAP program is not far-reaching enough in Appalachia and needs to be increased to reduce the levels of food insecurity in the region.

The lack of access to health care in the Appalachian region, primarily in the Central and Southern Subregions, points to the refusal by those states to expand Medicaid to the guidelines set out by the Affordable Care Act. It is devastating that there are millions of people in Appalachia who fall into the coverage gap. This detrimental impact extends beyond the individual's inability to access necessary preventative and life-saving medical care, which alone should be a motivation to expand Medicaid. It also negatively impacts the economic status of the states due to job and revenue loss. Expanding Medicaid in the six Appalachian states which have not yet done so would enhance the quality, affordability, and access to care for the region's inhabitants and increase the economic well-being of the area.

It is also crucial that rural hospitals are strengthened and supported to ensure that when facing health concerns, rural residents have hospital services within a close proximity. Without medical insurance, people, especially low-income individuals, often forgo preventative care due to its expenses. This often leads to preventative medical issues becoming emergency or life-threatening concerns that are brought into the emergency room for immediate care, putting an economic strain on the hospital because of uncompensated care. Medicaid expansion would alleviate a portion of this issue, by allowing for more insured individuals to gain preventive care, lessening the strain on hospitals. These rural hospitals could be further supported through increased funding and support on a state and federal level, a step that should be taken by government to promote the growth of rural hospitals, ultimately improving the economy of rural Appalachia and the health and well-being of its residents.

Abortion access, as previously discussed, is a right that should be accessible and affordable to all women. While this issue is highly contested, abortions should be legal and available—which is supported by moral, economic, and overall safety-based evidence. The principle of just one person, the fetus-carrying individual, being disadvantaged by an unwanted pregnancy is inherently unfair, pointing to the importance of a woman’s right to choose. From an economic standpoint, if affordable abortions were a viable option for women throughout Appalachia, there could be a lessened economic strain from low-income or single motherhood. This would also support the safety of women seeking to terminate their pregnancy, as unsafe and unregulated abortion procedures would not have to be performed.

Beyond the three more specific policy-based suggestions for women in Appalachia, there are more general steps that could be taken to reduce female and overall poverty in the region and enhance opportunities and resources. Given how pervasive poverty is in the region, many residents have lived in consistent poverty, causing poverty to seem somewhat inevitable. For women in particular, the expectation of homemaking and other stereotypical ‘female’ tasks has created a sense of limited opportunity in the workforce. Women should be encouraged by their government and local institutions to seek education, training, and careers in typically male-dominated fields, and that education and training should be funded through government grants or direct, hands-on work. To combat the sexual harassment that women in male-dominated fields frequently face, organizations and educational institutions should be properly trained to prevent and punish sexual harassment. Including women in higher-level job sectors and positions would increase their income and sense of equality and would be beneficial in a multitude of ways.

Local infrastructure should be improved and invested in, expanding on the goals of the policies initiated and agencies created in President Johnson’s War on Poverty. One of the main

emphases should be investment in public transportation, which is essentially obsolete in rural Appalachia presently. Increased public transportation would allow for more flexibility in job opportunities and provide freedom in terms of accessing health care and other resources around the region. While increased transportation options would provide a wider scope of job prospects, it does not address the problem faced by many families and single mothers, which is inflexible work hours and few options for affordable childcare services.

These suggested improvements in policy and government involvement, of course, do not describe every possible change that could, and should, be made in Appalachia. Rather, they suggest some solutions to the problems that have been raised in this thesis. There are a multitude of avenues policymakers could take to promote change and invest in women in Appalachia. The suggestions described here are just one piece of this complicated puzzle with the overarching hope that rural women in the Appalachian region may receive more attention from their policymakers, catalyzing a positive change in their opportunities, equality, and overall well-being.

Conclusion

The feminization of poverty is not a recent problem; poverty has historically impacted, and still impacts, women more commonly and harshly than men. This research has provided a more detailed look into how females are struck by poverty in the present day on a national scale, a problem further exacerbated in rural Appalachia. While the majority of research presented has been directed towards low-income women in the Appalachian region, the issues at hand pertain to the United States as a whole, which highlights the need for a societal and policy-based shift on a national scale. Women in the United States are facing an array of complicated, societally ingrained problems, including sexism, racism, and homo- and trans-phobia, and more specific issues like the gender pay gap, limited representation in government and high-level positions, homemaking and childcare responsibilities, sexual harassment, and much more. These factors of inequality, and the poverty levels that they reinforce, open up discussions of what are the roots of the problem, what can be done to combat it, and how does the problem differ along geographical and demographical differences.

The rurality of the majority of the Appalachian region causes female inhabitants to face poverty differently, and often more harshly, than women in urban areas. This issue is clearly complicated and intertwined with many factors. The line between structural and cultural poverty is increasingly blurring, with cultural poverty itself being rather contradictory. Considering how pervasive poverty in Appalachia has been, and currently is, it has, in a sense, become a “cultural” characteristic of the region. What distinguishes the Appalachian region from the original meaning of cultural poverty lies in where the blame can and should be placed. Much of the cause behind consistent poverty in Appalachia, specifically pertaining to women, is out of the individual inhabitant’s control. The issues are primarily a result of geographic isolation and

exploitation, an unstable economy, a gendered segmented workforce, negative stereotyping, limited resources and transportation, and dysfunctional public policies and procedures. The region needs adaptations to be made in a manner that allows for economic and social development to provide growth out of poverty, but still allowing its population to stay with their Appalachian roots.

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