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JUL 10 1985
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Number 130
October 1984

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC AGENDA PROJECT: AIDING WOMEN, WORKERS, AND THE POOR

By Marlene Kim

The Women's Economic Agenda Project (WEAP) is a statewide organization addressing the problems of women and children in poverty. Relying on the political clout of women's votes, WEAP has involved over 2000 people in compiling an agenda that defines the economic problems of women, explains their causes, and suggests legislative resolutions to help the increasing numbers of poor women and children. WEAP has already gathered much legislative support, including that of Senator Diane Watson (D-L.A.), Assemblypersons Tom Bates (D-Berkeley), Maxine Waters (D-L.A.), Gloria Molina (D-L.A.), and California Lieutenant Governor Leo McCarthy's Northern California Task Force on the Feminization of Poverty.

The Impetus: Rising Poverty of Women and Children—Women and their children make up an increasing percentage of the nation's poor. 75% of the poor are women and children, and two-thirds of the adult poor are women, up from 37% in 1969. Unfortunately, this trend, termed the "feminization of poverty," is continuing.

Three major factors contribute to the feminization of poverty. First is the changing family structure. The number of female single heads of households has doubled over the last ten years, and since the poverty rate among female-headed households is greater than that of male-headed ones, increasing numbers of women are becoming the poor. Divorce rates have also been increasing. Two-thirds of all marriages in California end in divorce, and when children are present, in 90% of these cases the mother becomes the children's custodian. Today, 19% of families with children are headed by a single mother, and 57% of these children are in poverty.

Second, women are at a financial disadvantage to care for themselves and their dependents, since they earn only 59¢ for every dollar a man earns. Families headed by a single mother average only 38% of the income of families composed of a husband, wife, and children. Only a quarter of children after a divorce receive child support, in part because 74% of fathers default in the first year of court-ordered support.

The earnings differences of men and women are largely explained by occupational segregation. Most women (80%) are concentrated in only 20 out of 420 job classifications, usually the lowest paid categories. Women hold two-thirds of all minimum wage jobs, and only 2% of skilled crafts employment. As a result, women hold jobs that pay less than male-dominated jobs of comparable skill, responsibility and experience. For instance, dog pound attendants, who are mostly men, earn more than childcare workers, who are mostly women. A recent survey states that if women were paid as well as similarly qualified men, female poverty would decline by 50%. Because of their low wages, many women cannot get out of poverty even when they do find work; for example, 33% of welfare women work but cannot earn enough to support their families.

Third, cuts in social services, such as in housing, medical, and childcare services, have exacerbated women's poverty. Sixty percent of the public support recipients are women, so they and their families have been hurt the most by the cutbacks in job training, Social Security, and low cost meals. During the Reagan Administration, there has been an increase of 2-1/2 million women and children living in poverty as a result of such social spending cutbacks, a weak economy, and lack of enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.

The results are that 20% of all children are poor (50% of all Black children are poor); 36% of female-headed families are poor (compared to 8% of male-headed families); and 48% of all white children (with 75% of Black children) in single mother families live in poverty.

To The Rescue: The Gender Gap—Partly because of the increasing impoverishment of women, women are voting differently and more progressively than men on many issues. Historically, voting patterns of women and men never differed more than 2%. But a Harris poll in March 1984 confirmed that the voting patterns of women now differ more from male patterns than at any time in history. This voting difference is dubbed the "gender gap." Women, Harris found, vote less by party labels and more by issues. They are less supportive of Reagan, more critical of his economic and foreign policies, and less in favor of defense spending and capital punishment. For instance, men by 55% to 44% said that Reagan has done an excellent or pretty good job of handling the economy; while women, by 53% to 46%, said he

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has done only a fair or poor job. Similarly, when asked whether they were better off financially than they were four years ago, only 34% of women ages 50 to 64 said there were better off, compared to 50% of those men asked.

Women are now the Democrats' majority, and in many primaries, are outvoting men and deciding election outcomes. As Harris states, women comprise at least 51% of the vote, and "are far and away the most pivotal bloc in the electorate of 1984." Because of this new bloc, women voters are forcing politicians to address their problems and concerns, and the results, including Geraldine Ferraro's Vice Presidential nomination, are making history.

WEAP: Putting It All Together, Poverty + Votes—WEAP plans to use this new voting clout of women as leverage in asking legislators to address women's economic needs and to end the rising poverty of women and children. Co-director Elain Zimmerman believes, "The gender gap is probably the most significant tool we presently have to diminish the feminization of poverty." On June 10, 1984, 300 women, including union activists, community leaders, AFDC mothers, lawyers, religious leaders, and academics convened at the state capitol and ratified an agenda of women's economic goals. Women from CWA, SEIU, CSEA, UAW and CLUW have had substantial input into the agenda; consequently, many concerns of labor are included. "After all, labor and women are working for the same goals and know that in the workplace there is no turning back," Zimmerman states.

The agenda addresses every aspect of women's lives. The workforce section calls for improving working conditions by organizing within the labor movement, since women in unions earn 30% more than unorganized women, have better benefits and working conditions, and can negotiate with management for job training, childcare, and comparable worth. It opposes legislation that undermines unions and union organizing and promotes legislation that strengthens the collective bargaining rights of workers.

To remedy the poverty of working women, it calls for equal pay for jobs of comparable skill, responsibility, experience, and work conditions to correct wage inequity caused by occupational segregation. It also calls for quality job training and placement for all workers, so that women can gain traditionally male-dominated jobs and so workers who have been displaced by plant closures or other economic dislocations can be retrained for a meaningful job. Finally it includes a full employment policy, plant closures protection, and other measures to ensure job security for all workers.

The family section calls for adequate, affordable childcare services, since 45% of mothers with children under age six are working, but many of these cannot find adequate childcare, nationally, 11 million children under age 13 have no care while their parents are working. According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, lack of childcare is a major cause of the poor economic status of women, since many women who need to work are forced to stay home on AFDC because of no adequate provision for their children.

Finally, the family and social policy section calls for welfare reform and income security to guarantee every person adequate health care, food, shelter, and education. Many needy women do not qualify for welfare or other income support payments because they fail to meet regulatory requirements. For instance, women are often excluded from unemployment insurance benefits because their low wages or part-time status make them fall below the minimum income requirement. WEAP endorses a national health plan to allow for comprehensive medical coverage for all, increased spending for social programs such as subsidized housing, income supports, health care, education, and a reduction in national defense spending.

WEAP plans to use this agenda as a guide in asking candidates to address the increasing impoverishment of women and to state what programs and policies they will implement, if elected. WEAP also plans to pass legislation to help ease the poverty of women and children, to educate the public about the feminization of poverty, and to develop the political leverage that women can have if they work together.

For more information about WEAP, including the regional coordinator in your area, contact the Women's Economic Agenda Project, 477 Fifteenth Street, Oakland CA 94612 — 415/451-7379.

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