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4 THE STATUS OF BLACK WOMEN IN THE LABOR MARKET - CONVERGENCE OR KEY DIFFERENCES?

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Is race or gender more important in explaining the labor market status of black women? This question is especially relevant given the closeness in the earnings of black and white women. In 1984, the median wage for full-time women workers was \$259 per week; it was \$264 (or \$13,700 annually) for full-time white women and \$242 (or \$12,600) for full-time black women. Full-time black women's earnings were 92% of full-time white women's earnings. Given this closeness, does it make sense to talk about the labor market's status of black women as distinct from the status of other women?

(1) Unemployment Rates. Black women have consistently experienced more unemployment than have white or Hispanic women; their unemployment levels tend to be twice those of white women. In December 1985, for example, the unemployment rate for adult white women was 5.4%, while the unemployment rate for adult black women was 12.6%.

Black women lose their jobs more quickly than do white women during recession. They also find jobs more slowly than black men, white men, and white women in periods of economic recovery. Black women's unemployment rates showed less cyclical sensitivity than the rates of black and white men, and unemployment rate improvement during recovery is more highly correlated with the length of recovery than unemployment rate improvement for other race-sex groups.

Differences in levels and patterns of unemployment among black women suggest that remedies developed to improve the unemployment situation may be less successful for black women than for others.

(2) Labor Force Participation. Labor force participation rates measure that proportion of the population that is either working or looking for work. Black women have always had high participation rates, but the gap between black and white women's labor force participation has narrowed considerably in the past fifteen years. In 1960, for example, there was a 12-point gap in the labor force participation rates of black and white women. By December 1985, black female labor force participation was 59.2%, while white female labor force participation was 54.4%.

The labor force participation of young black women has been dropping for some time, with rates for those 16-24 going below 30% in 1984. Barbara Jones cites the declining employment opportunities and increased competition for unskilled jobs as part of the reason these rates for young women are so low. The paucity of affordable childcare and job training programs, especially given rates of teen pregnancy, may also be factors in the declining participation of young women.

(3) Occupational Status. Perhaps the greatest difference in the status of black and white women is occupational in nature. At first glance, black and white women seem to be distributed similarly in occupations. A third of all white women are clerical workers, as are 30% of all black women workers. Twenty-three percent of all black women work in service jobs, as do 16% of white women. Fifteen percent of black women workers, and 17% of white women workers are employed in professional jobs.

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Beneath surface similarities lie key differences. Black women tend to be employed in lower-paying, lower-level, pink and blue collar occupations like manufacturing, service, and private household work (44% of black women are so employed). Black women also experience an occupational segregation distinct from the occupational segregation of white women. In addition to being employed in jobs that are "typically female," black women are also employed in jobs that are "typically," or disproportionately black female. If black women are either deliberately or traditionally "crowded" into a few low-paying jobs, they lower wages in those jobs where they cluster, and reduce competition (or increase wages) in the jobs where they are excluded. This concept of black women's crowding explains, in part, why black women receive lower pay than white women in similar occupations.

"Typically black female" occupations are defined as those where black women's representation is more than twice their representation in the labor force. In service jobs, for example, black women are overrepresented by a factor of three or four (or, at three or four times their representation in the labor force) as chambermaids, welfare service aides, cleaners and nurse's aides. Forty-one percent of the black women who work in service occupations are employed in these four jobs.

Similarly, nearly a quarter of all black women are concentrated in just six of 48 clerical occupations. They are overrepresented by a factor of four as file clerks, typists, teacher aides, keypunch operators, calculating machine operators, and social welfare clerical assistants.

Part-time work is common in those occupations where black women are concentrated. Many women work part time for "economic reasons," officially defined as part-time work accepted when full-time work is unavailable. For example, more than a third of all service workers are part time. Sixteen percent work part time for economic reasons. The part-time characteristics of jobs which black women tend to hold puts them at a disadvantage in the labor market. (The official definition of "economic reasons" excludes other reasons that are also "economic": for example, the paucity of child care, or the unavailability of flexible schedules.)

Another aspect of the occupational status of black women is the disproportionate number of black women concentrated in government employment. While 16% of all workers were employed by governments in 1981, 26% of black women workers were so employed. Nearly a third of the black women employed in clerical jobs worked for governments. Thus, many black women are covered by collective bargaining agreements in public employee unions; however, the fiscal uncertainties that governments face make it likely that some, if not many, of these women will find their employment in jeopardy.

(4) Poverty Status. For many black women poverty is the outcome of labor market status. High unemployment rates, occupational segregation, low wages, and frequent part-time employment result in poverty levels that are all the more devastating because so many black women (43%) head households. In fact, in 1982, 38% of the black women who were heads of households were workers, living in poverty. They had fewer support networks for child care and other household responsibilities. A focus on developing affordable child care is clearly important for these women.

What Do Differences in Status Mean? -- It is important to recognize differences between the status of black women and other women in the development of public policy. Targeted programs to hire black women in non-traditional jobs are one of the best ways to focus policy on the status of black women, but in absence of such programs, it is also useful to consider items on the "women's agenda" and ways they may affect black women.

Comparable worth policies, for example, may be particularly helpful to black women given their heavy concentration in government jobs and their high concentration in clerical jobs. The development of affordable child care is also beneficial to black women. On the other hand, initiatives like "workfare," especially when unaccompanied by substantial job training and advancement opportunities, may be especially harmful to black women and may do little to remove them from the treadmill of low paid, occupationally segregated work.

-- Julianne Malveaux

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