



Melanie Friend, *Fiona Woods with Dominic*, 1988. Weymouth, UK.

# The Feminization

By Lesley D. Harman

*L'article soutient que la féminisation de la pauvreté est un vieux problème qui porte un nouveau nom. À cause du désavantage systématique dont ont été victimes les femmes aux sein de la société patriarcale, elles ont toujours vécu dans la pauvreté ou la quasi-pauvreté. Le mythe de l'égalité dissimule le fait que toutes les femmes sont potentiellement sans-abri et que la dépendance des femmes vis-à-vis des hommes et de l'État contribuent à maintenir un système dominé par les hommes.*

Just as things are starting to look better for women, in what many have come to call the "post-feminist" era, the feminization of poverty is being spoken of as a new social problem. In fact, it is an old problem with a new name. Women's poverty, while not new, is taking a new shape. Women have always been poor, but through their dependent roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, their poverty has been concealed as only a potential plight, or as something that only happened to other women, women who did not have a man. But as more and more women live without men, either by choice or by necessity, women's poverty becomes more visible, and their dependency is transferred from the male breadwinner to the state. (Harman)

The apparent gains of the women's movement, including a general shift of women's presence from the domestic ghetto to a growing visibility in the public sphere, have been accompanied by a general complacency, as well as the recently noted backlash against feminism.<sup>1</sup> One

often hears that "things have changed"—the battles have been won, equality is here. What implications does this have for the young women about to enter the workforce? Many of these women have been encouraged to be independent and to develop their own careers, a path which they believe will ensure them a good life, in which they will avoid the dependency and potential poverty of their mothers and sisters who had followed the previous generations' role prescriptions. The current mythology is precisely that this life will be possible and attainable. The prospect of being unable to succeed is foreign; the idea that they might be susceptible to poverty, remote. The reality, however, is that in 1987, 59 per cent of poor Canadian adults were women—exactly the same figure as in 1975. (National Council of Welfare, 1) In Canadian society today, 84 per cent of all women will spend part of their adult lives without husbands, supporting themselves as well as their children. (National Council of Welfare, 15) At every stage of their lives, women are more likely to be poor, and are more likely to be trapped in a life of poverty.

What is meant by the feminization of poverty? Simply put, it means that without the support of a man, a woman is likely to be poor. This fact of life is not new. Women's economic dependency on men has been essential to the perpetuation of the system of masculine dominance. Economic dependency produces and is reproduced by women's subordination and powerlessness, which ensures that females conform, silently and passively, to role prescriptions around reproduction (moth-

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erhood) and labour (both unpaid domestic labour and work in the paid labour force). As more and more women enter the paid workforce, work and family obligations resulted in conflicts and often economic difficulties for women.

Reproduction factors heavily into women's material existence. As our society is currently organized, women have very little control over their reproductive potential. Women have the children, and childbearing and childrearing are the least valued of all occupations. If we can judge the social value of an occupation by how much those performing it are paid, we will quickly notice that those who get paid for caring for children (domestics, nannies, babysitters, and day care workers) are among the lowest paid of all members of society. Indeed, the pay for most typically 'female' jobs (clerical, service, teaching, nursing, and caregiving), reflects the fact that women's work in general is devalued and trivialized in our society. In 1988, 76 per cent of women in the paid labour force worked in these jobs (National Council of Welfare, 21). Women still earned 65 per cent of what men earned in the paid labour force in Canada. (National Council of Welfare, 27) This work is essential and must be done. However, as long as it is assumed that it will be done, gladly and even gratefully, by women for no money or recognition, then the fun-

*Women's economic dependency on men has been*

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## *with a New Name*

damental structures which reproduce women's dependency will continue to go unchallenged.

In addition to being assumed to be women's 'natural' role and ultimate route to fulfillment (which it may in fact be for many women), reproduction is used to legitimize women's inferior position in the paid labour force. Because it is generally assumed that most women in our society will eventually marry and have children, it is also assumed that their aspirations for career advancement are selfish. It is taken for granted that women will take several years from their careers to spend in full-time mothering. While it is true that over half of all married women in our society are in the paid labour force, and most of them are there because they need the income, it is also true that pregnancy and childbirth guarantee a minimum six-week absence from the workforce. With recent revisions to maternity leave provisions, new mothers can now leave their paid positions for up to six months (or more as unpaid leave). While the new leave provisions are long overdue and should be applauded, we must be careful not to overlook some of the possible implications of women's protracted absence from the paid workforce. It stands to reason that one or more lengthy absences from a career will put a woman "off time" in her own career. (Burman)

The resumption of a career after childbirth usually means employing another person to do the caregiving, although with the current economic recession often hitting male breadwinners, an increasing number of fathers are taking on full-time caregiving roles. Given the gross inequities between salaries in traditional dual-income families, it is usually the woman who receives less money for her work in the paid labour force. Deciding whether or not to go back to work is, therefore, sometimes a difficult decision. It is not unusual to hear a woman say, "I can't afford to work." What does this mean? It means that after taxes, work-related expenses (transportation, wardrobe, and lunches), many women find that having another person look after their children ends up costing them more than they earn. If they cannot afford to leave their jobs, they may then be heard to say, "I can't afford to have children."

The economic difficulties produced through work and family conflicts have serious implications for women's poverty. On the one hand, this situation can be used to argue that a woman's place is in the home and that we should return to the 'family wage,' an arrangement in which the male breadwinner is seen to be earning enough money through his one paycheque to support the entire family. This idea precludes the necessity of women working for income to share in the support of the family. It also puts the final nail in the coffin of the feminization of poverty, ensuring that women do not have any opportunities for economic independence. Women's poverty thus becomes a self-

fulfilling prophecy.

While a return to the family wage would seem to be unlikely in these times of dual-income families, of concern is that paid employment for women has itself become a poverty trap. The prevalent myth that women can compete in the paid labour force, offered equal opportunities to succeed in their careers, and make adequate incomes, is shattered when it is understood that for many women it is economically impossible to work in the paid labour force and have children. Economic dependency on either the male breadwinner or the state becomes a necessity, rather than a choice.

The above discussion has assumed a traditional, nuclear familial arrangement in which there are no adult caregivers to stay home during the day with the children, a paid male breadwinner, and a mother who is forced to give up her job in order to look after the children during the day because she cannot afford to work. This is perhaps one of the least visible manifestations of the feminization of poverty because by returning to the private sphere, the women in question are no longer considered to be on the job market and are not categorized as "unemployed." (Burman) Instead, they have resumed their so-called 'natural,' dependent roles in the family. As long as women are economically dependent on men, the opportunities for change are very few.

While female economic dependency is not new, some of the manifestations of what happens when women live in ways other than traditional dependency arrangements, are becoming gradually more vis-

*essential to the perpetuation of masculine dominance.*

ible. Such visibility confirms that the more things change, the more they stay the same. As recent statistics reveal, women's poverty is most striking among those living without men. According to the National Council of Welfare, 75 per cent of never-married female single parents, 52 per cent of previously married female single parents, 44 per cent of unattached women over the age of 65, and 33 per cent of unattached women under 65, are living

mothers, all mothers of young children who find themselves 'alone' (read: without a man) may eventually find it necessary to turn to the state for financial support.

Aging and poverty are historically related in our society, particularly for women. Because women tend to outlive men by an average of seven years, it is likely that women will spend at least some portion of their last years alone. Recently,

women has dropped from 42 per cent in 1977, to 22 per cent in 1987, we continue to find that many older women who are alone must survive on next to nothing. (National Council of Welfare, 129)

The bleak reality of being old and female is that there is very little hope of ever emerging from a life of poverty. Poverty is more like a life sentence: as long as you are alive, you will be poor. When women are young, the myth of equal opportunity



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in poverty in this country. (National Council of Welfare, 9)

Teenage pregnancy is often a direct path to early and long term poverty for women. For young women who give birth and keep their babies, the label 'single mother' is inevitable. Even when they marry the fathers of their children, the majority of such unions end in early divorce, with the mothers usually taking custody of the children and often ending up as Family Benefits recipients. Family Benefits is another expression of economic dependency on the state. Along with never-married or divorced teenaged

the aged have become more affluent, perhaps due to increases in universal pensions and the tendency for more employed citizens to finance their own retirement through registered retirement pension plans. However, a woman who has spent her adult life bearing and rearing children and doing unpaid domestic labour in the home may have had little opportunity to save, and is not entitled to the Canada Pension Plan in her old age. While increases in the Guaranteed Income Supplement for low income senior citizens have meant that the poverty rate of elderly

seems more believable. As we have seen, however, myths can be the most insidious traps of all. The myth of equality of opportunity extends to other minority groups as well. If the dominant, privileged, and wealthy group in our society is comprised of white, able-bodied, heterosexual, Anglo Saxon males somewhere in their middle years with a university education, then we can see that not only is our society sexist and agist, but it is also racist, heterosexist, and ablist.

In our racist society, 'women of colour'<sup>2</sup> are made to feel as if they are 'other'

to white women. Immigrant women face difficulties upon arriving in Canada, such as language barriers, lack of education, and racial discrimination in the job market. Domestic workers are one of the most exploited groups of immigrant women. Not only do they perform the most devalued roles in our society, but they are subject to low pay, low status, cruelty, and harassment by their employers. Finally, the double impact of gender and race is nowhere more evident than in the lived experiences of aboriginal women, who belong to the poorest and most discriminated against group in Canadian society.

Discrimination on the basis of sexual preference exists for lesbian women. The Canadian state offers tax advantages to those who marry and have children, resulting in relative economic disadvantage for women who do not. Subtle and not-so-subtle heterosexism may result in lesbian women having to conceal their sexual orientation for fear of losing their jobs or not being hired.

Physical disability is an almost guaranteed route to poverty for women. Disabled women are less likely to be married than are disabled men or able-bodied women; if they are alone, they are less likely to be employed and will therefore have to depend on the state for their material existence. Disabled single mothers often find it difficult to find affordable, accessible housing. (National Council of Welfare, 117)

Perhaps the most visible indication of the breadth and depth of the feminization of poverty is the growing phenomenon of homelessness among women. (Harman) Women who become homeless have basically lost, or never had, the means to support themselves. This is a tragic but inevitable outcome of the feminization of poverty. Homelessness occurs among women from all social classes and a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. It is very difficult to gather reliable data on homeless women because they are the group of women in our society which is the most difficult to locate. Their abject poverty, entitling them to membership in the 'underclass,' places them both outside and below the class system, and disenfranchises them from citizenship in this society.

The web of relations that constitutes the rights and duties of citizens (home owner-

ship, taxation, employment, familial relations) also necessitates a series of controls over citizens, in the form of numbers: address, phone, bank account, social insurance, credit card, health insurance, driver's license, passport—the list seems endless. While many such identifiers have taken on the rather perverse connotations of freedom and privilege in our society (the American Express Card), they are really ways of locating and potentially controlling the 'homeful.' When women are 'homeful' they can always be found ("May I speak to the lady of the house, please?"). When women are homeless, what they 'lack,' the source of their 'deficiency,' is precisely a place within these relations of dependency.

The plight of homeless women points to certain contradictions in Canadian society which affect the lives of all women, 'homeful' or not. To be a woman in Canada today is to face a strong likelihood of being poor at some time in one's life. The myth of equality of opportunity conceals the fundamental inequalities which continue to keep women economically dependent on men and the state. While appearing to guarantee women's economic security, the traditional roles of wife and mother in fact only serve to mask how close all women are to a life of poverty. When women attempt to break free of dependency relations, their inferior position in the paid workforce, and the liabilities they will face if they have children, they have a greater likelihood of being economically disadvantaged and of seeking social assistance. Women who are older, non-white, lesbian, or disabled, will find their experiences of poverty compounded.

What is the price of freedom? With all of the courage that it takes to be free of masculine dominance in one's personal life, it is inevitable that it will be replaced by the domination of the state through some form of social assistance. The structural conditions that might guarantee women's financial independence are simply not in place. Does this mean the ultimate freedom is to simply opt out? As Thelma and Louise chose their own death above subjugation to male brutality and the violent state, so it seems that homelessness and abject poverty are the ultimate end for those women who do not have a conventional place within the patriarchy. Is this

horrific observation far from the truth? It seems that as long as reproduction and labour power remain in the hands of the patriarchy, so will the material existence of women.

For there to be a glimmer of hope on the horizon, we must look to ways in which women can enrich their own lives. Like all powerless groups, women have found strength in numbers, and empowerment in revaluing what their oppressors devalue. Perhaps the feminization of poverty exists because 'feminine' is defined as impoverishing. Finding our wealth in the very traits which make us poor in this society may be a rewarding path on the road to true equality.

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<sup>1</sup> See Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> I use this term reluctantly because the term itself is implicitly racist. The language lumps all 'women of colour' together as being 'not white,' thus implying that the only normative woman is white.

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