

# The Feminine Face of Poverty

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If you're a woman, or a man who cares about his mother, sister, or daughter, there's something you need to know. Seventy percent of those living in absolute poverty in our world -- that is starving or on the edge of starvation -- are female. Not only that, in our wealthy United States, women and children are the mass of the poor and the poorest of the poor.

Women are entitled to know that statistically women worldwide are far more likely to be poor than men. Even if you're a guy, this "women's issue" is about your mother and your grandmother. It's about your sisters and it's about the future of your daughters.

Consider that in the United States women over the age of 65 are twice as poor as men in the same age group. And there's a reason poverty so disproportionately hits women. Most of these poor women were, or still are, caregivers. And we've got an economic system that gives no visibility or value to this essential work when it's done in the home.

In fact, according to economists, the people who do the caring work in households, whether female or male, are "economically inactive." Of course, anyone who has a mother knows that most caregivers work from dawn to dusk. And we also know that without their work of caring for children, for the sick, and for the elderly, there would be no workforce, no economy, nothing.

Yet current economic indicators and policies fail to include this work. Measures of productivity such as GDP (gross domestic product) not only include activities that harm and even take life -- such as making cigarettes plus the resulting medical and funeral bills -- but fail to include the life-sustaining activities that contribute the most to human well being. The life-sustaining work of caring for people and maintaining a clean and healthy home environment still performed primarily by women in households is not included as "productive work."

The good news is that we can change this bizarre way of looking at what is, and is not, productive work. In fact change is already in the works.

Already in 1995 the UN Human Development Report estimated that the economic value of the unpaid work of women worldwide is a whopping 11 trillion dollars per year. A 2004 Swiss government survey placed the value of the unpaid work in households at 70 percent of the reported Swiss GDP. And according to salary.com, a U.S. organization, the caring work of a mother is worth over \$100,000 per year.

Recognizing the value of caring and caregiving is the first step. The next, essential step, is changing business practices and government policies to recognize and reward this work

in ways that put food on the table and a roof over people's heads. We need family-friendly business policies such as good paid parental leave and government policies such as caregiver tax credits and, for poor mothers, caregiver stipends and other forms of parenting assistance.

The Canadians are already doing this: their Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program offers assistance to mothers. And it's a tremendous economic investment in the bargain. Assessments of the program show that children are gaining in health and skill levels due to this assistance -- in other words, that in economic terms, the program is an excellent investment in high quality human capital.

Sweden has a paid parental leave policy that makes it possible for both mothers and fathers to be home with their new babies for many months. By contrast, the only U.S. state that has even a very modest paid parental leave policy is California. But it's a start -- and [Mom's Rising](#) has launched a campaign to bring similar bills to other states, starting in the state of Washington.

The [caregiver tax credit](#) proposed by Theresa Funciello is also beginning to gain attention. And so is the Caring Family Values Policy Agenda proposed by the [Center for Partnership Studies](#).

Now it's up to us to join these efforts. It's up to us to ensure that the truth about poverty is told by politicians and the media.

It's up to us to vote for legislators who really value the work of mothers and other caregivers, who will, not just in rhetoric, but through the bills they introduce and vote for, support this work. It's up to us to convince businesses to have more family-friendly policies by buying only from those that do. It's up to us, in our own work and lives, to give real value to the most important work: the work traditionally performed by mothers of caring and caregiving -- the work that keeps our economy and all of us going. That's how we can change the shameful fact that the mass of the poor worldwide are women and children.

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