The Invisible Women of the Great Depression

By Kathy A. McMahon

During the Great Depression, women made up 25% of the work force, but their jobs were more unstable, temporary or seasonal than men, and the unemployment rate was much greater. There was also a decided bias and cultural view that "women didn't work" and in fact many who were employed full time often called themselves "homemakers." Neither men in the workforce, the unions, nor any branch of government were ready to accept the reality of working women, and this bias caused females intense hardship during the Great Depression.

The 1930's was particularly hard on single, divorced or widowed women, but it was harder still on women who weren't White. Women of color had to overcome both sexual and racial stereotyping. Black women in the North suffered an astounding 42.9% unemployment, while 23.2% of White women were without work according to the 1937 census. In the South, both Black and White women were equally unemployed at 26%. In contrast, the unemployment rate for Black and White men in the North (38.9%/18.1%) and South (18%/16% respectively) were also lower than female counterparts.

The financial situation in Harlem was bleak even before the Great Depression. But afterward, the emerging Black working class in the North was decimated by wholesale layoffs of Black industrial workers. To be Black and a woman alone, made keeping a job or finding another one nearly impossible. The racial work hierarchy replaced Black women in waitressing or domestic work, with White women, now desperate for work, and willing to take steep wage cuts.

Survival Entrepreneurs

At the start of the Depression, while one study found that homeless women were most likely factory and service workers, domestics, garment workers, waitresses and beauticians; another suggested that the beauty industry was a major source of income for Black women. These women, later known as "survivalist entrepreneurs," became self-employed in response to a desperate need to find an independent means of livelihood.

Replaced by White women in more traditional domestic work as cooks, maids, nurses, and laundresses, even skilled and educated Black women were so hopeless, "that they actually offered their services at the so-called 'slave markets'-street corners where Negro women congregated to await White housewives who came daily to take their pick and bid wages down" (Boyd, 2000 citing Drake and Cayton, 1945/1962:246). Moreover, the home domestic service was very difficult, if not impossible, to coordinate with family responsibilities, as the domestic servant was usually on call "around the clock" and was subject to the "arbitrary power of individual employers."
Inn Keepers and Hairdressers

Two occupations were sought out by Black women, in order to address both the need for income (or barter items) and their domestic responsibilities in northern cities during the Great Depression: (1) boarding house and lodging house keeping; and (2) hairdressing and beauty culture.

During the "Great Migration" of 1915-1930, thousands of Blacks from the South, mostly young, single men, streamed into Northern cities, looking for places to stay temporarily while they searched for housing and jobs. Housing these migrants created opportunities for Black working-class women, now unemployed, to pay their rent.

According to one estimate, "at least one-third" of Black families in the urban North had lodgers or boarders during the Great Migration (Thomas, 1992:93, citing Henri, 1976). The need was so great, multiple boarders were housed, leading one survey of northern Black families to report that "seventy-five percent of the Negro homes have so many lodgers that they are really hotels."

Women were usually at the center of these webs of family and community networks within the Black community:

"They "undertook the greatest part of the burden" of helping the newcomers find interim housing. Women played "connective and leadership roles" in northern Black communities, not only because it was considered traditional "woman's work," but also because taking in boarders and lodgers helped Black women combine housework with an informal, income-producing activity (Grossman, 1989:133). In addition, boarding and lodging house keeping was often combined with other types of self-employment. Some of the Black women who kept boarders and lodgers also earned money by making artificial flowers and lamp shades at home." (Boyd, 2000)

In addition from 1890 to 1940, "barbers and hairdressers" were the largest segments of the Black business population, together comprising about one third of this population in 1940 (Boyd, 2000 citing Oak, 1949:48).

"Blacks tended to gravitate into these occupations because "White barbers, hairdressers, and beauticians were unwilling or unable to style the hair of Blacks or to provide the hair preparations and cosmetics used by them. Thus, Black barbers, hairdressers, and beauticians had a "protected consumer market" based on Whites' desires for social distance from Blacks and on the special demands of Black consumers. Accordingly, these Black entrepreneurs were sheltered from outside competitors and could monopolize the trades of beauty culture and hairdressing within their own communities.

Black women who were seeking jobs believed that one's appearance was a crucial factor in finding employment. Black self-help organizations in northern cities, such as the Urban League and the National Council of Negro Women, stressed the importance of good grooming to the newly arrived Black women from the South, advising them to have neat hair and clean nails when searching for work. Above all, the women were told avoid wearing "head rags" and "dust caps" in public (Boyd, 2000 citing Drake and Cayton, 1945/1962:247, 301; Grossman, 1989:150-151).

These warnings were particularly relevant to those who were looking for secretarial or white-collar jobs, for Black women needed straight hair and light skin to have any chance of obtaining such positions. Despite the hard times, beauty parlors and barber shops were the most numerous and viable Black-owned enterprises in Black communities (e.g., Boyd, 2000 citing Drake and Cayton, 1945/1962:450-451).

Black women entrepreneurs in the urban North also opened stores and restaurants, with modest savings "as a means of securing a living" (Boyd, 2000 citing Frazier, 1949:405). Called "depression businesses," these marginal enterprises were often classified as proprietorships, even though they tended to operate out of "houses, basements, and old buildings" (Boyd, 2000 citing Drake and Cayton, 1945/1962:454).

"Food stores and eating and drinking places were the most common of these businesses, because, if they failed, their owners could still live off their stocks."
"Protestant Whites Only"
These businesses were a necessity for Black women, as the preference for hiring Whites climbed steeply during the Depression. In the Philadelphia Public Employment Office in 1932 & 1933, 68% of job orders for women specified "Whites Only." In New York City, Black women were forced to go to separate unemployment offices in Harlem to seek work. Black churches and church-related institutions, a traditional source of help to the Black community, were overwhelmed by the demand, during the 1930's. Municipal shelters, required to "accept everyone," still reported that Catholics and African American women were "particularly hard to place."

No one knows the numbers of Black women left homeless in the early thirty's, but it was no doubt substantial, and invisible to the mostly white investigators. Instead, the media chose to focus on, and publicize the plight of White, homeless, middle-class "white collar" workers, as, by 1931 and 1932, unemployment spread to this middle-class. White-collar and college-educated women, usually accustomed "to regular employment and stable domicile," became the "New Poor." We don't know the homeless rates for these women, beyond an educated guess, but of all the homeless in urban centers, 10% were suggested to be women. We do know, however, that the demand for "female beds" in shelters climbed from a bit over 3,000 in 1920 to 56,808 by 1932 in one city and in another, from 1929 -1930, demand rose 270%.

"Having an Address is a Luxury Now...
"Even these beds, however, were the last stop on the path towards homelessness and were designed for "habitually destitute" women, and avoided at all cost by those who were homeless for the first time. Some number ended up in shelters, but even more were not registered with any agency. Resources were few. Emergency home relief was restricted to families with dependent children until 1934. "Having an address is a luxury just now" an unemployed college woman told a social worker in 1932.

These newly destitute urban women were the shocked and dazed who drifted from one unemployment office to the next, resting in Grand Central or Pennsylvania station, and who rode the subway all night (the "five cent room"), or slept in the park, and who ate in penny kitchens. Slow to seek assistance, and fearful and ashamed to ask for charity, these women were often on the verge of starvation before they sought help. They were, according to one report, often the "saddest and most difficult to help." These women "starved slowly in furnished rooms. They sold their furniture, their clothes, and then their bodies."

The Emancipated Woman and Gender Myths
If cultural myths were that women "didn't work," then those that did were invisible. Their political voice was mute. Gender role demanded that women remain "someone's poor relation," who returned back to the rural homestead during times of trouble, to help out around the home, and were given shelter. These idyllic nurturing, pre-industrial mythical family homes were large enough to accommodate everyone. The new reality was much bleaker. Urban apartments, no bigger than two or three rooms, required "maiden aunts" or "single cousins" to "shift for themselves." What remained of the family was often a strained, overburdened, over-crowded household that often contained severe domestic troubles of its own.

In addition, few, other than African Americans, were with the rural roots to return to. And this assumed that a woman once emancipated and tasting past success would remain "malleable." The female role was an out-of-date myth, but was nonetheless a potent one. The "new woman" of the roaring twenties was now left without a social face during the Great Depression. Without a home--the quintessential element of womanhood--she was, paradoxically, ignored and invisible.

"...Neighborliness has been Stretched Beyond Human Endurance."
In reality, more than half of these employed women had never married, while others were divorced, deserted, separated or claimed to be widowed. We don't know how many were lesbian women. Some had dependent parents and siblings who relied on them for support. Fewer had children who were living with extended family. Women's wages were historically low for most female professions, and allowed little capacity for substantial "emergency" savings, but most of these women were financially independent. In Milwaukee, for example, 60% of those seeking help had been self-supporting in 1929. In New York, this figure was 85%. Their available work was often the most volatile and at risk. Some had been unemployed for months, while others for a year or more. With savings and insurance gone, they had tapped out their informal social
networks. One social worker, in late 1931, testified to a Senate committee that "neighborliness has been stretched not only beyond its capacity but beyond human endurance."

Older women were often discriminated against because of their age, and their long history of living outside of traditional family systems. When work was available, it often specified, as did one job in Philadelphia, a demand for "white stenographers and clerks, under (age) 25."

The Invisible Woman

The Great Depression's effect on women, then, as it is now, was invisible to the eye. The tangible evidence of breadlines, Hoovervilles, and men selling apples on street corners, did not contain images of urban women. Unemployment, hunger and homelessness was considered a "man's problem" and the distress and despair was measured in that way. In photographic images, and news reports, destitute urban women were overlooked or not apparent. It was considered unseemly to be a homeless woman, and they were often hidden from public view, ushered in through back door entrances, and fed in private.

Partly, the problem lay in expectations. While homelessness in men had swelled periodically during periods of economic crisis, since the depression of the 1890's onward, large numbers of homeless women "on their own" were a new phenomenon. Public officials were unprepared: Without children, they were, early on, excluded from emergency shelters. One building with a capacity of 155 beds and six cribs, lodged over 56,000 "beds" during the third year of the depression. Still, these figures do not take account the number of women turned away, because they weren't White or Protestant.

As the Great Depression wore on, wanting only a way to make money, these women were excluded from "New Deal" work programs set up to help the unemployed. Men were seen as "breadwinners," holding greater claim to economic resources. While outreach and charitable agencies finally did emerge, they were often inadequate to meet the demand.

Whereas black women had particular hard times participating in the mainstream economy during the Great Depression, they did have some opportunity to find alternative employment within their own communities, because of unique migration patterns that had occurred during that period. White women, in contrast, had a keyhole opportunity, if they were young and of considerable skills, although their skin color alone offered them greater access to whatever traditional employment was still available.

The rejection of traditional female roles, and the desire for emancipation, however, put these women at profound risk once the economy collapsed. In any case, single women, with both black and white skin, fared worse and were invisible sufferers.

As we enter the Second Great Depression, who will be the new "invisible homeless" and will women, as a group, fare better this time?

References:


Kathy McMahon, Psy.D. collects stories from people all over the world, who are worried, anxious and depressed about Peak Oil, climate change, and the economic hard times ahead. She's been offering feedback to her readers at no charge, for more than two years at http://www.peakoilblues.com You can read stories of people who are in the process of making critical life change and transformation. Dr. McMahon welcomes stories and letters about coping with the world's current economy, energy, and environmental situation. Appropriate topics include stress management (fear, anxiety, worry, depression or insomnia,) how to simplify your life to live a frugal and debt free existence, personal finance, money management,
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