Week 3: Poverty, Prisons, and Stories of Survival

WMST/FS 60, Winter 2009

Professor Miller-Young
• What does the election of Barack Obama mean for women and the causes of feminism in the U.S. and around the world?

• What does it mean for racial and class politics in the U.S. and the world?

• How might women of color be specifically affected?
Major issues affecting women of color in the U.S. are:

Poverty, homelessness, opportunities for employment and equal pay and benefits, reproductive freedom and access to affordable health care, education, criminalization, rape, abuse and domestic violence, and stigma and stereotype in representation.
Pay Equity and Poverty

- Women (all) earn 77 cents for every $1 men make. Black women earn 63 cents and Latinas 57 cents (also quoted as 72 and 60 cents).
- Women are 40% more likely to be poor than men, 70% of older women.
- 60% of “extremely poor” (less than half poverty line) are women.
- 35.5% of single mother households are living in poverty.
Welfare Policies & Discourses

• WOC are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of welfare policies and discourses.
• Welfare is part of a system of oppression that reflects and reproduces racial and economic privilege for some and disadvantage for others.
• WOC are stigmatized as breeders of criminals, undeserving, promiscuous, irresponsible, lazy & dependent.
• Stereotypes, like the “Welfare Queen,” represent poverty as personal, individual, and behavioral failures rather than historically-based social, political, & economic structures. They affect policy and public perceptions of the issue and the value of poor women.

- Authorized states to make their own rules, regulations, and punitive practices.
- Set 2 yr. limit and 5 yr. lifetime limit.
- Coerces women into low-wage labor force through “Workfare” and “Work First” programs.
- Bars new *legal* immigrants from benefits for first 5 yrs.
Criminalizing Welfare

- Welfare and criminal justice systems are converging to control poor WOC lives.
- WOC increasingly criminalized with the expansion of surveillance policies like drug testing, and rules against supplemental income (defined as fraud).
- WOC, once convicted, cannot obtain future welfare benefits, including food stamps or housing assistance.
From Social Welfare to Social Control

- Welfare is an institution and discourse that reproduces ideologies of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in intent, implementation, and impact.
- The “Illegitimacy Bonus”, denials of assistance to “illegal aliens”, & the “Family Cap”, lead to surveillance of WOC.
- Poor women are increasingly criminalized due to welfare policies.
- The welfare system and criminal justice system are converging.
Prisons in the U.S.

Incarcerated Americans
1920 - 2006


Changes in State Spending 1985 - 2004

Source: The New Landscape of Imprisonment: Mapping America's Prison Expansion from The Urban Institute, 2004
Women in U.S. Prisons


Source: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics Report NCJ 221944; Prisoners in 2007