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Symposium: Theory and Praxis in Reducing Women's Poverty

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FOREWORD

SYMPOSIUM: THEORY AND PRAXIS IN REDUCING WOMEN'S POVERTY

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The statistics alone substantiate the urgent need for a reduction in women's poverty. In 2010, 46.2 million Americans were living below the official poverty line, the highest number in the fifty-two years in which the Census Bureau has gathered figures.¹ Additionally, the poverty rate among women rose to 14.5%, the highest rate in seventeen years.² This means that more than 17 million women were living in poverty, compared with 12.6 million men.³ The "extreme poverty rate"⁴ among women was the highest ever recorded at 6.3%, and women are poorer than men in all racial and ethnic groups.⁵ Black and Latina women face particularly high rates of poverty: over 25% of black women and 25% of Latina women are poor.⁶

* Emily A. Benfer, Clinical Professor of Law, Loyola University Chicago School of Law; Davida Finger, Assistant Clinical Professor, Loyola University New Orleans College of Law; and Annette Appell, Professor of Law, Washington University Law School, were instrumental in the development of, and selection of papers for, the American Association of Law Schools Sections on Clinical Education and Poverty Law joint session, "Theory and Praxis in Reducing Women's Poverty."

1. See CARMEN DENAVAS-WALT ET AL., U.S. DEP'T COMM., INCOME, POVERTY, AND HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE IN THE UNITED STATES: 2010 (2011), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p60-239.pdf>; see also Sabrina Tavernise, *Poverty Rate Soars to Highest Level Since 1993*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 14, 2011, at A1.

2. NAT'L WOMEN'S LAW CTR., POVERTY AMONG WOMEN AND FAMILIES, 2000-2010: EXTREME POVERTY REACHES RECORD LEVELS AS CONGRESS FACES CRITICAL CHOICES 1 (2011), available at <http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/povertyamongwomenandfamilies2010final.pdf>.

3. *Id.* at 14.

4. Extreme poverty indicates an income below half of the federal poverty line.

5. NAT'L WOMEN'S LAW CTR., *supra* note 2, at 1.

6. *Id.* at 2.

Every one of these women, and the families and communities to which they are connected, interact with legal systems on a daily basis, often to their own detriment. As this symposium demonstrates, women's poverty intersects with multiple diverse areas of law, including employment, immigration, criminal, government benefits, family, education, and judicial systems. The focus on reducing women's poverty allows for a dissection and examination of these systems and the conditions that perpetuate the low socioeconomic status of women, particularly minority women.

In recognition of this problem and the complexity of issues that contribute to the gender and race of poverty and the urgent need for innovative solutions to ending poverty among women, the American Association of Law Schools Sections on Clinical Education and Poverty Law sponsored a joint session at the 2012 Annual Meeting: "Theory and Praxis in Reducing Women's Poverty."⁷ During that session, presenters and participants assessed the barriers poverty creates for poor women and their families, proposed explanations for women's poverty and explored remedies to help ameliorate, or at least mediate, women's low socioeconomic status. The session served as a foundation for further thoughtful and penetrating discourse on the intersection of poverty and gender, as well as the role of lawyers and law schools in developing insights and methods regarding law reform and advocacy for impoverished communities.

The legal academy has a unique opportunity to create and disseminate ideas and information about the legal systems and processes. This symposium confronts the role of the family, the community, and the nation from domestic and international perspectives. It suggests critical and creative changes necessary to bring to bear the complex and intersectional challenges for, and experiences of, impoverished individuals and the divide between advocates focused on discrete areas of women's poverty. Collectively, the symposium articles shed new light on the multifaceted issue of women's poverty and make creative, original contributions to the critical discourse on this subject. They argue for an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach, the reform of policies and judicial systems that deprive basic sustenance and parental rights, proceedings that give the individual greater control over the outcomes, scrutiny of economic environments, and community based support of individual women and families facing hardship.

As the title of the symposium suggests, reducing women's poverty requires both the theoretical and contextual evaluation of systems creating

7. Poverty Law & Clinical Legal Educ. Secs., AALS, Theory and Praxis in Reducing Women's Poverty, Joint Session at the 2012 AALS Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. (Jan. 7, 2012).

and responding to poverty, as well as a practical approach to address these challenges through the work of law school clinics and the practice of law. The legal academy is well situated to address these issues through our teaching, especially in the clinical setting. The symposium examines the root causes and consequences of poverty for women and people of color and, just as importantly, the role of the academy in exposing future lawyers to these issues and methods to remedy these disparities. Perhaps even more importantly, the authors provide their reflections on how the legal academy can prepare students to respond to this urgent and dire issue. The authors' approaches allow law students and lawyers to craft sophisticated solutions that empower individuals and communities to overcome women's poverty.

This symposium offers new insights and voices regarding the connections among poverty, gender, and the law, as well as the role of the legal academy in teaching students about justice and law reform. These cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, and interdoctrinal approaches provide models for teaching and learning, as well as methods for improvements in the structure and delivery of justice for impoverished women and children. We anticipate that the papers in this symposium will advance the discussion and analysis of women's poverty, the role of law schools in disseminating knowledge and understanding of the many intersections between law and poverty, and the role of lawyers in working with and on behalf of impoverished communities.

