

Teaching Methods

Women and Social Security

An Applied History Overview

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Recent statistics indicate that 72% of the elderly poor are widowed, divorced, or never-married women. The fact that many of these women are left destitute in their old age can be looked at from several perspectives. My particular interest is in how Social Security policy contributes to the potential poverty of women. The area of investigation is that of dependency—the designated category through which most women collect Social Security benefits.

In its original form, Social Security was set up to reduce and stabilize an all-male labor force amid the crisis of unemployment. Only later, in 1938, were concerns raised about benefits for family members, primarily wives.

Thus before a single check was issued, the framework for Social Security was shifted from a person both paying into and receiving from a system on an individual basis to a person paying into the system as an individual but receiving benefits as a family unit. The assumptions behind that decision were based on the fact that the typical family of the 1930s was composed of a life-long breadwinner, a financially dependent wife, and dependent wife, and dependent children. Only 15% of all married women were in the workforce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975). Even with that reality, the Social Security administration made several assumptions: (1) during their lifetime women caring for children would earn enough to cover their 50% claim on their husband's benefits; (2) the use of revenues from single men was appropriate

because they had the assurance of “dependence insurance” upon their own marriage (Advisory Council in Social Security, 1937); and (3) over 50% of the wives of men retiring at 65 would have already died.

Subsequent additions and changes were made without regard to either initial Social Security assumptions or to the changing patterns in women’s work. After years of operating within their own values framework, the Social Security administration found itself in trouble in regard to discrimination against men. Policy makers were compelled to open up certain categories that had previously been available only to women: mother’s benefits, ability of widows to collect at age 62, PIA factoring, and dependency benefits available without an income test.

By 1977, Congress mandated the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) to design proposals to eliminate dependency as a factor in entitlement to spouse benefits and to eliminate any additional sex discrimination in the Social Security program (U.S. House of Representatives, 1977: 51). In more prosperous times, perhaps different sets of values could have been accommodated, but in leaner times, some hard choices will have to be made. Because 63% of all those claiming Social Security are women, and 8.4 million of them make claims as dependents, any policy to eliminate the dependency category will have considerable impact on women. It is ironic that the present recipients are made up of more dependent women than the working men who were to benefit from the original system. Have women suffered from the system as many suggest or have they manipulated it extremely well?

To resolve the issues involved in dependency, government agencies have focused on demographic and economic analysis, and as a result, appear to be in a state of paralysis. The status quo prevails despite congressional mandates and it is easier to vote no on any changes than to take responsibility for new ones.

My research constitutes an attempt to add a historical and values perspective to the well-intended demographic and economic analysis. It is my position that decisions reflect certain values as well as establish boundaries, beyond which policy

makers feel they have no jurisdiction to make policy. Decisions made in the past were not value free, nor are present and future proposals made in a value-free setting. How did Social Security policy makers get locked into traditional value assumptions while other governmental branches did not? What other options could have occurred along the way if value assumptions were more in line with women's work history?

The model used in looking at values was designed at the Institute of Gerontology at the University of Michigan.¹ This article focuses on two of the seven categories described in that literature: that of adequacy/equity and independent/dependent. A value code questionnaire was created to use with each article read from Social Security Bulletins from 1938 to 1981.

Key words in Social Security debates over the years have been adequacy and equity. The distinction between "social adequacy and individual equity" was and is crucial to any Social Security analysis. Early arguments were that if insurance were voluntary, one must assure equity; if it were compulsory, it must protect covered persons from hazards and provide a minimum support (Hohaus, 1930: 77). It was out of this assumption of adequacy and the assumption of women's dependency that various policies were passed which I call "adequacy advantages." Of the 157 articles surveyed, 101 dealt with issues of adequacy. As mentioned earlier, adequacy advantages for women included early retirement at 62, mother's benefits if widowed, earlier widow claims at 60, PIA factoring at 62, and wife dependency benefits without any income test. The adequacy advantages were what opened Social Security to be challenged in the name of equity for men. The courts ruled in the name of equity that each adequacy advantage must be made accessible to men. This has been a costly venture and one unanticipated by the Social Security policy makers. As familiar as they were with balancing equity and adequacy, they had not looked at the tension in relationship to women. Concentrating on traditional role models and a commitment to tilt benefits in favor of the poor, women's needs over the years were only looked at in terms of adequacy. The equity issues were not addressed in 132 of the 157 articles. Social

Security policy makers remained in a vacuum while all around them other agencies were forced to deal with issues such as equal pay for equal work, quota systems to guarantee equal access to jobs, and stability on the job once employed. Many interest groups now are looking to Social Security policy makers to pick up the gaps left by others' failures to meet equity needs. At present, interest groups are pushing the Social Security administration to both increase adequacy for recipients and deal with noninsurance equity issues.

The second category dilemma, dependent versus independent, is equally complex. In the 1930s, women's dependency on their husband's earnings was evident. Their earlier preindustrial role as copartners in productivity had long lost its power. During the 1940-1960 period, benefit decisions were made in the context of dependency assumptions while at the same time, women were encouraged to work for the sake of the war efforts. Three and a quarter million women left the work force after World War II but two and three-quarter million returned. There was a dramatic shift in women's work patterns and it made no impact on the dependency value operative at the time. Today we live in a time when marriage has become less common among younger women; divorce rates have risen; fertility has dropped; women work more outside the home; and women's life expectancy continues to increase faster than that of men (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979: 9). Such awareness raises questions as to whether Social Security policy makers continue blindly to foster dependency at a time when it no longer works for the financial well-being of most women in old age. Well after statistics indicated that there are more women in the work force than not, benefits continue to be most advantageous for the women who always stayed at home. Even the women at home want recognition that what they do is work and therefore wish to receive Social Security benefits in their own right for the function they perform, but they want to do so without paying into the system. What can policy makers do to get rid of a dependency category that has been an operative value since the 1930s?

It is my contention that utilization of historical analysis provides a creative way to look at this particular problem which has not been resolved through purely economic and demographic analyses. By looking at the past, one can appreciate long-term philosophical conflicts and ambiguities as well as understand a certain value framework within which decisions have been made. Failure to recognize changing trends and how they affect past value assumptions will limit one's ability to think creatively about new policy directions and to grasp the constraints in which one must operate. The success of my dissertation will be in my ability to identify times when debate surfaced because of discontinuity in women's work life and Social Security policy, to discern why it was not dealt with, and to discern at what points arguments could have developed to provide alternatives. Where are the turning points at which Social Security policy makers missed out? At what juncture did they take certain steps to reach their present dilemma? Within their own limited value parameters, were there other options?

The difficulty with present interest groups concerned about equity issues for women is that they know nothing of past decisions, mistakes, or successes that shaped our present policies today. The use of a value code and a statistical analysis of my findings is a way for me to look objectively at value perceptions of the past. The data will be used to examine the continuities and discontinuities of women's work life. I also wish to study the present proposals to see what inherent value assumptions they are working with, and to ask whether they are in conflict or in accord with past Social Security value assumptions. Clearer insights will, I hope, emerge toward addressing the whole issue of "dependency" as it relates to modern day women.

NOTE

1. Categories in total:

Adequacy/Equity
Independent/Dependent
Traditional/Modern Role Patterns
Family/Individual
Public/Private
Work/Leisure
Achievement/Entitlement

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