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Taking Economic Development Into Their Own Hands

by
Nancey Leigh-Preston

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Summary

Southern rural black women are the most economically disadvantaged of the major U.S. population groups, but public policies and economic development programs have essentially ignored the specific needs and problems of this group. Southern rural black women face not only the usual barriers that hinder economic development in rural areas but also the combined effects of racism and sexism. They are now organizing to take control of their own economic development, as seen in the case studies of the Southern Rural Women's Network and Mothers of Many.

The Southern Rural Women's Network (SRWN) and the Mothers of Many (MOM) are two grassroots organizations that have begun an important campaign to combat the barriers to economic development faced by southern rural black women. These women traditionally have not been viewed as a group in their own right with special problems and needs. As a result, public policies and programs needed to change their disadvantaged economic position have not been created. Broader socioeconomic policies and programs such as the "War on Poverty" programs of the 1960s have either held constant or worsened the economically dependent position of southern rural

black women. The barriers to economic development in underdeveloped and rural areas that confront women, blacks, and low-income groups combine to pose a formidable challenge for southern rural black women. Only policies and economic development programs that take into account the specific conditions of their lives, such as those being put forth by SRWN and MOM, will help these women overcome the barriers to gaining economic control of their own lives and communities.

The Southern Rural Women's Network developed in response to the persistent disadvantaged conditions under which poor black women have lived in the rural South. The Network is a two-year old organization owing much of its origins to Billie Jean Young, black female attorney and director of Rural America's Southeast office in Jackson, Mississippi. Young had grown up in rural Alabama and knew well the situation of southern rural black women. Her first opportunity to see black women in leadership positions occurred when she left the Deep

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South to work in Washington, D.C. When she returned to the South in 1981, Young was convinced that southern rural black women must take the leadership in improving their own situations.

Young, along with Monica Walker, a National Rural Fellow, organized a conference in November 1981 to propose the formation of the Southern Rural Women's Network. One hundred and fifty women from six southern states and the District of Columbia came to the conference in Epes, a small community in rural Alabama. Out of the gathering came the formal motion to establish the Network.

The achievements of SRWN in its short history are considerable. State and local chapters have been organized in Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Organizing efforts in South Carolina are underway. Numerous conferences and workshops focusing on the barriers to development for rural women have been held in each state by SRWN. Technical assistance and other forms of support have been provided to women-run business enterprises. In addition, SRWN has built coalitions with other grassroots organizations whose interests are complementary to its objectives.

The Southern Rural Women's Network has a close and collaborative relationship with the Mothers of Many, an organization begun in 1972 in Selma, Alabama. MOM's efforts are aimed at improving the quality of rural life in the blackbelt of Alabama, focusing primarily on the issues of education and employment. While the goals and activities of MOM have a narrower focus — geographically and substantively — than those of SRWN, they are still closely related. Both organizations operate on the conviction that freedom from economic dependency is the southern rural black woman's most basic need. The reasons underlying this conviction and the strategies by which SRWN and MOM are working for the elimination of economic dependency deserve recognition in the economic development field. A brief discussion of the southern black woman's role in the cycle of rural poverty will shed some light on the origins of this conviction.

SOUTHERN BLACK WOMEN AND THE CYCLE OF RURAL POVERTY

Underdevelopment has long been associated with the southern region of the U.S., particularly with its rural areas. The weak economic position of the black population living in these areas has largely been determined by racism and the legacy of racism. The combined impacts of racism and sexism have resulted in southern rural black women as the most disadvantaged of America's major population groups.

The South has the highest percentage of poor and low-income people in the nation.¹ More black women live in poor households than any other group in the South. Black women have the highest rates of unemployment and involuntary part-time employment, and when they are employed it is often in low-paying, unskilled jobs. Their employment in marginal jobs was over 14 percent higher than that of black males and white females; it was more than 22 percent greater than the rate for

white males. In addition, more than 30 percent of southern black female workers had incomes categorized as "inequitable" by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.²

As the preceding data indicate, southern rural black women are the core of "the cycle of rural poverty and underdevelopment."³ The "war on poverty" begun over twenty years ago under the leadership of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson failed most in its inability to break the cycle of poverty for these women.

The social service and economic development programs that began in the 1960s have been criticized because they did not help blacks gain "good," primary-sector jobs and because they increased poor blacks' dependency on transfer payments and in-kind services. "Welfare colonialism" is the label given by some to this second criticism, implying that the greatest beneficiaries of these programs were the administrators and agencies delivering them instead of their clients.⁴

The undesirable state of dependency associated with welfare colonialism is most evident among black rural women in Deep South states — some of whom are third-generation welfare mothers. The programs and bureaucracies growing out of the War on Poverty generated public-sector jobs and pumped federal dollars into the lagging rural economies within southern states, but rural black women did not receive their share of these jobs. The transfer payments did not provide a decent standard of living, and the regulations associated with them (e.g. Aid to Families With Dependent Children) contributed to the erosion of traditional family structures. While Headstart — the nationally recognized preschool program that developed out of Mississippi — has been considered a valuable program for impoverished rural children, the programs offered for these children's mothers have been labeled trivial.⁵

Instead, the public and private sectors of southern state economies were the beneficiaries of the transfer payments and public-program dollars directed to unemployed rural black women and their children. In addition, employed rural black women have had an important but undervalued role in their state's economic development. Their low-paid labor, and unpaid labor in many cases, was originally a significant factor in the agriculture sector, followed by the labor-intensive manufacturing and service sectors.

The role of black women in rural society has also been significant but undervalued. These women perform important community services and are the major supporters of the most important institution in rural areas, the Church. However, they have tended to work in the background and shadows of their male counterparts. Part of the reason the roles, contributions, and problems of rural women are not widely recognized stems from this tendency. For rural southern black women these tendencies were evident even within the 1960s Civil Rights movement. While black women's participation was crucial in initiating and sustaining the Civil Rights movement, black men emerged as the spokespersons of the movement. In the numerous black community-based organizations that have developed since the 1960s, the labor of black women has been essential, but again, few are to be found working in leadership positions in rural areas.



Billie Jean Young, Executive Director of the Southern Rural Women's Network, speaking on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol.

THE SOUTHERN RURAL WOMEN'S NETWORK

According to the founders of SRWN, the levels of local economic development activity and grassroots organizing in the South have escalated in recent years in reaction to federal cutbacks and to rising levels of temporary and permanent unemployment. The women who organized SRWN wanted to make sure that black rural women were involved in these economic development activities and that sexism did not prevent them from having leadership roles, from receiving credit for their efforts, and from ensuring that their efforts were directed toward improving their own lives. For these reasons, and others, a separate women's organization was considered essential. Further, the founders wanted to reach out to the inactive black woman who has been left with feelings of hopelessness from the combined impacts of sexism, racism, and economic dependency. SRWN's goal is to eliminate these feelings of hopelessness and the dependent position in which the southern rural black woman finds herself.

Economic development is the key to improving the quality of life for the southern rural black woman, her family, and her community. Substantial barriers must be overcome, however, in order for work in economic development to begin. While the degree of sexism and racism may have declined in recent years, these broad societal barriers still act to limit opportunity for the southern rural black woman. She also faces "technical" barriers such as a lack of skills and education, business experience, job opportunities, and support services for working women. Small towns, long distances to employment centers, and lagging economic activity in rural areas compound the problems rural women have in overcoming economic stagnation.

In addition, SRWN has identified a number of internal barriers that prevent the southern black rural woman from having confidence in her ability to participate fully in the economy. She frequently has a low self-image because her physical appearance does not resemble that which is predominantly displayed in the media and because she feels unsophisticated in comparison to urban women. Further, the southern rural black woman lacks familiarity with business and economic concepts, and even more important, leadership experience.

SWRN's Priorities

Thus, while economic development is a fundamental goal of SRWN, the approach it must take is much broader than traditional economic development strategies. The organization has to work for structural changes in the southern rural society and economy that will clear the path for those black women who are developing new roles for themselves. SRWN's priorities established thus far which go beyond traditional economic development to basic structural problems include: voter education and registration, teenage pregnancy/sex education, and educational testing. Each state SRWN chapter sets the priorities for its state.

Furthering voter education and registration among rural black women (and men) in the Deep South states is an essential step to their empowerment and involvement as citizens in the economic development of their communities and states. The problem of low black voter turnout can be considered two-sided. On the one hand, the ability to vote freely still does not exist in many rural areas within these southern states.⁶ On the other hand, blacks who can vote freely have not yet fully exercised their rights to do so. As a consequence of both influences, the voting power of the rural black population has not been used to secure more meaningful legislation and policies addressed to their economic development problems.



Participants at the first organizing conference of the Southern Rural Women's Network.

Grappling with the problem of teenage pregnancy is another priority established by SRWN chapters. High birthrates among black rural teenage girls are coupled with low percentages of high school graduates. In both Mississippi and Alabama, black teenage pregnancy is nearly double the state averages. Only 30 percent of rural black females have graduated from high school. In contrast, Alabama's and Mississippi's percentages of high school graduates among urban black women is 47 percent and 40 percent respectively, while among urban white women it is 66 percent and 71 percent respectively.⁷

Teenagers in these states become mothers before they have reached the most basic levels of education, perpetuating the cycle of poverty in which rural black women give birth to successive generations of welfare dependents. SRWN is working toward mandatory sex education in the schools as one way of increasing the chance that young rural black women will gain the basic skills necessary to hold entry-level jobs or to acquire more specialized skills. The Network knows it will encounter strong opposition in pursuing this objective, but it considers sex education an important part of breaking the links between teenage pregnancy, high-school dropout rates, and the correspondingly high number of rural black women in marginal jobs. Churches will be among the strongest opposing forces, even though rural black women have always worked hard to support the development of local churches.

Educational testing is another priority area chosen by SRWN chapters. The inability of many black children to perform well on standardized tests administered by educational systems derives from inferior school teaching as well as cultural biases inherent in many of the tests. Poor performances on these standardized tests create yet another barrier to young blacks obtaining better education and job opportunities.

These three priority issues chosen by the SRWN state chapters — voter registration, teenage pregnancy, educational testing — are the focus of conferences, workshops, and organizing efforts in which southern rural black women learn the ways these issues affect their own and their children's lives.

SRWN also directly promotes the capacity of the southern rural black woman in economic development through more traditional technical assistance and business development approaches, as well as approaches designed to meet the special needs of its members. For example, SRWN conducts training sessions on "economic literacy" for the many rural black women who are not familiar with the basic business and economics concepts used by the news media, local politicians, and policymakers. Broadening their knowledge of these concepts enables SRWN members to understand what is happening in the economy, and is an important first step toward being able to develop their own ideas about the shape of economic development policy. Another aspect of the economic literacy training involves demonstrating to rural women participants that they already possess business skills they simply may not have recognized. These include the fundraising, program development and managing, budgeting, and marketing skills that they have used in community and church projects.

For the SRWN member to begin to take control of her own development, however, she must first develop confidence in

her ability to work on major public issues. To this end, SRWN holds workshops to help members develop leadership skills. A speaker's bureau has been established to give members the opportunity to become vocal and recognized in their communities.

In its employment counseling and training needs workshops, SRWN focuses on the employment barriers rural women face. Rural black women in Alabama and Mississippi have the lowest labor-force participation rates in their states, 40 and 42 percent respectively. Nearly 30 percent of black rural households have female heads compared to only 7 percent of white households in the two states. Not surprising, median incomes for rural households headed by black women are the lowest of all households.⁸ To assist rural black women in obtaining employment, SRWN's workshops cover discrimination, entry into nontraditional employment, skill deficiencies, and the job search process.

The Southern Rural Women's Network has also given business and technical assistance to several women's business enterprises, including Greene-Hale Sewing Cooperative in Alabama and MOM. The Mothers of Many's new enterprise, MOM's Cleanall, is described in the following section.

MOTHERS OF MANY (MOM)

The name, Mothers of Many, conveys the sense of responsibility that was the driving force behind the organization's creation over a decade ago. Rose Sanders, the black female attorney who helped found MOM, describes its underlying philosophy as follows: "Women cannot be good mothers without being fulfilled persons. Furthermore, they cannot be good mothers by conforming to traditional concepts of women's roles. It is, instead, necessary for women to be independent and self-sufficient."

MOM's approach to improving the quality of life for poor rural women and their children has been to focus on the special educational needs of the children. But in its search for a way to be self-sufficient and to meet the employment needs of women who sought the organization's assistance, MOM has gotten involved in economic development ventures.

One of MOM's first achievements was the establishment of the MacRae Learning Center, a preschool that concentrates on readying poor children for successful primary-school experiences through early development of basic reading, writing, and math skills. The Center originally depended on government



grants but now considers itself financially self-sufficient with the exception of the public monies it receives as fees for low-income children's attendance.

The After School Experience is a more recent education program developed by MOM. Its goal is to meet the needs of public school children victimized by bad education and competency testing requirements. The program provides remedial school work and lessons in how to take standardized tests. The program is not financially independent and must rely on outside grants. MOM's goal is to support the program in-house through the profits generated by its new business enterprise, MOM's Cleanall, which has developed and plans to market an all-purpose household cleaner. To date, MOM has obtained a formula for the cleaner, negotiated a contract with a manufacturer to produce the cleaner, and received the first batch from the manufacturer.

Setting Up a Business Venture

The Cleanall venture is not MOM's first attempt to establish a viable business. The first venture was a restaurant that failed after a year and a half because of undercapitalization, inexperience, and the recessionary economy. Although MOM was forced to accept that its first business venture was a failure, it came away from the experience with its desire to have a diversified funding base intact, a nascent entrepreneurial spirit, and the willingness as well as the opportunity to learn from failure.

In its search for a new business venture, MOM was motivated by the desire not to have to depend on customers showing up at its doors. The most appealing idea was a business where MOM could market directly to its customers. MOM also wanted a venture with unlimited employment-generating potential. While it was operating the restaurant, MOM found that there were never enough jobs to fill the needs of women who came to them asking for employment. MOM also wanted to find a venture whose product could supply a stable demand, so two additional criteria for the product were that it have many purposes and daily use. With the above criteria in mind, MOM, with the assistance of SRWN, settled on a business venture that sold household cleaner.

Careful thought has been given to the selection of MOM's second business venture, which is based on a fundamental economic development principle of "import substitution." By producing locally a good or service that community residents previously had to buy from an outside producer, a community venture creates local employment and keeps within the local area the income derived from the sale of the good or service.

MOM's strategy requires that MOM salespersons will be able to convince brand-loyal customers to give up their collection of nationally advertised household-cleaning products. Because Cleanall is a multipurpose cleaning product, MOM's marketing strategy is to get its foot in the door by convincing customers to substitute Cleanall for at least one of the cleaning purposes for which the customer's brand-loyalty may not be as strong. Included in the marketing strategy for MOM's Cleanall are home demonstrations where Cleanall is compared with a variety of household cleaning products found in the average home. The cost for that typical collection of products (in the

range of \$16.00) is compared to the \$6.50 charge for an equivalent amount of cleaning capacity in a jug of Cleanall.

Training sessions for the distributors and sellers of MOM's Cleanall have been designed and the first group of trainees graduated in November 1983. The training for MOM's distributors is aimed at two groups: 1) the long-term unskilled unemployed with no income; and 2) people with some source of earned income, but who are underemployed and need supplemental income. The first group is required to attend four nights of training per week for four weeks. The training sessions include basic business skills development (i.e., bookkeeping) and personal skills development. The latter area of basic skill training is aimed at teaching women who suffer from low self-esteem how to market themselves and, in turn, their product. Both groups of trainees receive training in the ethics of selling and the technology of the product, as well as the larger purposes and objectives of MOM.

MOM hopes to recover its initial investment in the Cleanall enterprise within its first two years of operation. MOM's short-term business expansion plan is to enter into direct production of Cleanall. The benefits expected from this expansion include: eliminating the venture's dependency on sub-contractors, increasing the returns to the organization for the product, and directly creating additional employment. The long-range goal of MOM is to expand from one product to a line of products that it markets directly. This will further its goals of moving toward financial self-sufficiency for the organization and creating jobs for women.

DEVELOPING AN ALTERNATIVE FUTURE

Southern rural women are the most disadvantaged of the major population groups in the United States, but economic development for southern rural black women has not been an explicit public policy goal. Public programs aimed at alleviating the symptoms of poverty for poor rural women and their children have had the undesirable result of creating dependency rather than reducing it. Further, the private economy has allowed these women to attain only the most marginal of economic positions.

Economic development is a fundamental goal for the members and children of members in SRWN and MOM. Both organizations define economic development as freedom from dependency. No band-aid strategy will enable these women to meet their goals because the barriers they face are structural. Thus, the work of SRWN and MOM goes beyond what is traditionally defined as economic development to include improving the educational experiences of southern rural black women's children, increasing political participation among members and within their member's communities, and decreasing teenage pregnancy. Most important of all, they work to strengthen the leadership capacity of southern rural black women. It is only through leadership development that the efforts of SRWN and MOM will be sustained. Furthermore, this leadership is required to pursue direct economic development programs.

It is too early to predict the ultimate impact and success of SRWN and MOM. The initial barriers that must be overcome in order to begin to empower southern rural black women are immense; success in surmounting them will only push MOM and SRWN up against new barriers. Their members will then not only want to be part of the labor force, they will want good jobs. They will not only want to be employees, they will want to be employers and business owners. The attempt of southern rural black women to take control of their economic situation is in no way simple. But the alternative, should they not take up the challenge, is more of the same with which they have always been faced: that is, living in a no-alternative situation leading to fourth and successive generations of welfare mothers.

By taking the initiative for their own development, it is not only southern rural black women who stand to gain. Their children will benefit from improved living standards and opportunities. Further, all of southern rural society and economy will benefit from a reduction in the number of its dependent members and corresponding increases in the number of contributing members. Thus, all stand to gain from the efforts of the Southern Rural Women's Network and the Mothers of Many to take economic development into their own hands. While their very definition of economic development implies that they must provide this development for themselves, it is in the public interest to create policies and programs that will enhance the efforts of these southern rural black women. ■

NOTES

¹See the current edition of *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, "Income, Expenditures, and Wealth" section.

²*Unemployment and Underemployment Among Blacks, Hispanics, and Women*. United States Commission on Civil Rights, Clearinghouse Publication 72, November 1982. The marginal jobs category "was created by selecting the occupations with mini-

mal skill requirements (with 3 months or less of experience or training specified in the DOT data set) and excluding any that had higher than average earning levels." In addition, "Persons were defined as inequitably paid if their actual earnings for the previous year were substantially less than would be expected if all workers were paid according to the same formula."

³This is a label Jonathan Sher uses in Chapter 8 of *Education in Rural America*, Jonathan Sher, editor (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977).

⁴See Michael K. Brown and Steven P. Eerie's "Blacks and the Legacy of the Great Society: The Economic and Political Impact of Federal Social Policy," in *Public Policy*, Volume 29, No. 3 (Summer 1981), pp. 299-330.

⁵The experience of Unita Blackwell, a prominent member of SRWN and one of Mississippi's three black female mayors, in one of these programs was related as follows:

"She recalled how as a housewife in 1963 she attended one of the government-sponsored classes designed to help women better themselves, only to find the women making jewelry boxes out of macaroni and cigar boxes. 'I took one look at that and said "this here don't make sense," then I took my share of macaroni home and cooked it — I didn't have no jewelry to put in it anyway,' she said."

(Quoted from *Rural America*, Winter 1983, p. 7.)

⁶One of SRWN's earliest activities was to take up the cause of two black rural women, Maggie Bozeman, 51, and Julia Wilder, 69, who volunteered their time to help rural residents register and vote, and who were convicted of voting fraud in Alabama and sentenced to four- and five-year prison sentences respectively.

⁷Comparable data for Tennessee have not yet been published from the 1980 Census of Population. Data for Alabama and Mississippi are from: "General Social and Economic Characteristics," 1980 Census of Population, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, PC801-C2 and PC80-C26.

⁸*Ibid.*

