Lily Friedman

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Professor Lasch-Quinn

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Stopping the Cycle

Our founding fathers, all being white men, created a government that included their own self-interests. Racial and gender equalities were not even taken into consideration. This has led to racial and gender inequalities to form and perpetuate over hundreds of years. Actions must be taken to reduce these inequalities and in turn alleviate the economic inequalities.

Economic inequality in the U.S. directly correlates to racial inequalities within our country due to “the early American economy [being] built on slave labor. The Capitol and White House were built on slaves” (Coates 5). As history continued, black people never really gained control of their destinies, impacting their ability to gain economic independence. Even as the Civil War ended and slaves were “free,” “laws governing slavery were replaced with Black Codes governing free black people – making the criminal-justice system central to new strategies of racial control” (Stevenson 3). Slavery now has been translated into the criminal justice system in which mass incarceration disproportionately affects black people.

Eleven percent (11%) of African American children have an incarcerated parent, compared to 1.75% of white children and 3.5% of Latino children (Western and Pettit 14). These disparities are not only impacting the children of the incarcerated parent and the individual who has been incarcerated, but incarceration gets passed through generations of the same family. As stated in one of the readings, “social and economic disadvantage, crystallizing in penal confinement, is sustained over the life course and transmitted from one generation to the next” (Western and Pettit 8).

The higher rates of incarceration among the black race are directly linked to economic inequality as those individuals face many setbacks when trying to get back into the workforce. Specifically, “a criminal record was found to reduce callbacks from prospective employers by around 50 percent” (Western and Pettit 14). It is also important to acknowledge that when these individuals are released from prison, they do not have a lot of money to their name. They also have less experience in the workforce because they have been spending time in jail. As stated by Western and Pettit, “time in prison means time out of the labor force, depleting the work experience of the incarcerated compared to their non-incarcerated counterparts” (Western and Pettit 14).

There are also big disparities amongst gender correlated to economic inequality. Cawthorne stated that “poverty rates are the same throughout childhood but increase for women during their childbearing years and again in old age” (Cawthorne 1). A major reason that the poverty rates increase as women age is due to the wage gap that is persistent in our country. Specifically, “women who work full time earn only 77 percent of what men make – a 22 percent gap in average annual wages” (Cawthorne 2). The effects of the wage gap are felt throughout a woman’s life and the gap widens as men continue to earn more.

Women usually take the role of being the caregiver for their children. Since most women are “combining unpaid caregiving with paid work…women are more likely to work part time or take time out of the workforce to care for family” (Cawthorne 2). When looked at more closely, “twenty-three percent of mothers are out of the workforce compared to just 1 percent of fathers”

(Cawthorne 2). The added tasks that a woman endures throughout her lifetime on top of trying to maintain a job demonstrate that from the start women are at an economic disadvantage. Moreover, if women decide to stay in the workforce, the wage gap could also be their downfall regardless.

Steps can be taken to reduce racial and gender inequalities correlated to economics. Some argue that reparations are the best solution to address racial inequalities. However, the logistics of this method are where it gets complicated. For example, if reparations were given to all black individuals, it would not be as productive to give the money to black celebrities as they already have a substantial amount of money. Reparations can also be seen as an attempt at taking the easy way out to resolve a long history of oppression. Giving out reparations could allow others to silence those affected by racism in our country's economic system from complaining because they received their share of money to account for these disparities. As Coates explains, if reparations were to be considered, a deep discussion would need to occur to hash out exactly what would be done. Coates mentions that she is in favor of reparations to revive the system America is built on rather than giving out flat cash payments (Coates 6).

In order to reduce the racial economic differences and begin restructuring America, baby bonds are worthwhile to consider. Baby bonds are "federally managed accounts set up at birth for children endowed by the federal government with assets that will grow over time" (Inequality.org 1). This would change the structure of the system in order to make a significant difference in closing the racial economic gap. Baby bonds have already proven to be effective as "one recent study show[ed] a baby bond program has the potential to reduce current black-white wealth divide by more than tenfold" (Inequality.org 1). Setting children up from birth with this money gets their life started on the right foot and aids them in escaping the hole of deep racial economic differences.

Reallocating the money in the prison system is also crucial to reducing the mass incarceration of black people. Instead of spending $70 billion on "correctional expenditures," it would be more useful to put this money towards "improving skills and reducing unemployment in poor neighborhoods" (Western and Pettit 8). Spending money on programs such as anti-violence and drug abuse programs would reduce crime in struggling neighborhoods. This would ensure that fewer peoples' lives are ruined by incarceration, so they still have a chance at getting a decent job and ending the generational incarceration cycle.

While closing the wage gap in the workforce seems like an easy solution – pay women the same as men – it is not as easy to implement. One step in the right direction is to implement a policy in which "women in the workforce have affordable child and elder care, as well as access to quality flexible and paid family leave" (Cawthorne 3). This would allow women (as well as men if they are the primary caregiver) to still tend to their childcare responsibilities without it impacting their economic endeavors.

Our country has deep racial and gender inequalities. This is because much of our economic and social system was built on slavery and the idea that the white man is superior to everyone else. While this is sad to recognize, we cannot change the past. Instead, we must see how we can alleviate these inequalities moving forward. By deconstructing the mass incarceration system and spending the money towards community programming, investing in baby bonds, and providing women extra support for childcare, these problems in our country can begin to be resolved. Everyone must recognize how significant the racial and gender inequalities are in our country and how they correlate to economic inequality before we can take strides towards improving the conditions. We must end this historical cycle of inequality.