

# CHALLENGING THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY:

*Women in Poverty in the Central Coast Region  
of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties*

A Report by the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE)  
Women's Economic Justice Project

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
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CAUSE's Women's Economic Justice Project (WEJP) is a research, community planning, leadership development and community/labor organizing project dedicated to the economic empowerment of low-wage working women in the Central Coast Region of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties. Established in November 2001, WEJP is a direct response to the growing feminization of poverty among low-wage working women in the region. An outgrowth of local campaigns to adopt city and county living wage ordinances and efforts to unionize low-wage women service and caregiver workers, WEJP's formation represents the development of regional movement for women's economic justice. Along with the convening of a regional conference on women's economic justice and publishing a regional report on the feminization of poverty, program methodologies utilized by WEJP include public policy formation, participatory research, popular education, leadership development and coalition building in support of grassroots community and labor organizing efforts by low-wage working women.

Here in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, they work five, six and often seven days a week, yet they can not make ends meet. They labor at backbreaking work, picking our fruit and vegetables, and cleaning our homes, offices and hotel rooms. They care for our children, our sick and elderly. They cook and serve our meals. Increasingly, those doing what we commonly label as “women’s work” don’t make enough money to pay for groceries, afford decent day care for their children, make rent payments, or receive basic medical care for their families.

This preliminary report by the CAUSE Women’s Economic Justice Working Group underscores that while low-wage working women are contributing enormously to our regional economy and to our society in general, they increasingly bear the brunt of the adverse effects of poverty among the working poor. This report addresses several key elements of poverty among working women in the central coast region of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, including: the general growth in poverty in the region, women and low-wage work, welfare reform, and women’s occupational health and safety.

Research indicates that the growth in poverty among women, sometimes termed the “feminization of poverty,” results from a number of social and economic factors including dramatic changes in family structure, economic restructuring, changing demographics and shifting government policies, most notably welfare “reform.” For example, during the last two decades, rising divorce rates and numbers of children born outside of marriage have increased single mother households, thereby creating conditions under which more women are vulnerable to poverty.

Equally important, dramatic changes in California and the central coast region have had profound effects on the lives of working families, and with particular implications on the lives of low-wage working women, specifically low-wage immigrant women. Continued growth in the already large low-wage service and retail sectors in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties are providing little opportunity for low-wage working women to move themselves and their families out of poverty. Currently Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties’ combined service, retail and agricultural sectors make up 52 and 57 percent of their total employment respectively.

The sectors with the greatest job growth in recent years, while not only paying low-wages, also represent occupational sectors predominately employing women. For example, In-Home Supportive Service workers, of whom approximately 98 percent are female, are paid an average of \$6.75 per hour; childcare workers, of whom 97 percent are women, earn an average income of \$8.40 per hour; and retail sales persons, of whom 61 percent are women, earn a median wage of \$7.50 per hour after having worked with the firm three years.

Poverty among women is further intensified by the wage gap between women and men, which although having been reduced somewhat since the 1970s, still remains significant. In California in the late 1990s women earned an average of 70 cents to every dollar that men earned, only 20 cents more an hour than they earned in the early 1970s.

Service Sector Job Growth Central Coast Region of Ventura and Santa Barbara 1994 to 2001			
County/Region	Service Sector Job Growth	Total Job Growth	% of Service Sector Job Growth of Total Job Growth
Ventura	21,100	48,750	43
Santa Barbara	20,502	28,875	71
Total Central Coast Region of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties	41,602	77,625	53

*Despite California’s tremendous economic recovery in the late 1990s, the number of families living under the federal poverty level in Ventura County has increased by 44 %. The number of children living in poverty has grown by 71%.*



*Nationwide women are 50 percent more likely than men to be living in poverty. In 2000, 37% of single women in California were living below the federal poverty level, compared with 25% nationwide.*



*Nearly 40% of the new jobs projected for California in the next 10 years will be occupations requiring only a high school education or less and brief on-the-job training. At least 36% will be in occupations that pay an average less than \$10 per hour.*

Economic restructuring in the central coast region of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties has been dominated by dramatic growth in the low-wage service sector jobs. This coupled with gender-based wage inequality and occupational segregation in low-wage jobs has resulted in an increased number of women entering the labor force as low-wage workers and, in turn, joining the growing ranks of the region's working poor.

Women immigrants, both documented and undocumented, participate in and contribute significantly to the California and the Central Coast economy. Despite this, a disproportionate number of them are concentrated at the lower end of the labor market. While education, English proficiency and legal status are important factors determining economic assimilation for many immigrants, research also indicates that racial and anti-immigrant discrimination also play a role. Pronounced anti-immigrant sentiment, even before 9/11, has immigrants feeling increasingly insecure, making them more vulnerable to abuse. Other gender related issues, such as cultural perceptions of women's roles and responsibilities both in the workplace and in some immigrant households, as well as workplace gender discrimination and harassment make moving up the economic ladder particularly difficult for immigrant women.

The social costs associated with ignoring or minimizing the feminization of poverty are enormous. While it is morally unconscionable that working people who labor at one and often two jobs be paid so little that they are unable to meet the basic needs of their family, the negative effects of their poverty are broad and long term. First of all, low-wages, which amount to poverty wages, result in a direct public subsidy to employers in the form of public assistance, such as MediCal and food stamps.

Second, Latinas, and immigrant women, who make up the vast majority of low-wage working women in this region, also represent a growing ethnic population in California and the region. Long term neglect of this growing labor force and consumer base will result in devastating long-term effects on the region's economy. Women workers, whether in the home or in the labor force, play a critical role in the long-term economic development of the region. Whether as workers, community leaders, professional caregivers, or as mothers, who by choice or by necessity are responsible for the care and development of our children, the "real work" of women is indispensable to our future's economic sustainability.

*In the City of Santa Barbara, after calculating health care, childcare, food, utilities, taxes, city bus transportation, and housing, a single parent with two children must earn \$38,676, and a couple, \$51,780 a year to make ends meet. For a single parent household this is 176% higher than the minimum wage of \$6.75 per hour.*



*Nationwide women account for 48% of the labor force, and 59% of those workers making less than \$8 per hour.*

Career Trajectories of Women Exiting Welfare, Ventura and Santa Barbara County, 2000									
County	Earnings under the Federal Poverty Level	Ag. Mining, Construction	Manufacturing	TCU	Wholesale Trade	Retail	FIRE	Services	Public Admin.
Santa Barbara	74.6%	7.4%	7.5%	1.2%	1.4%	32.4%	3.7%	44.6%	1.9%
Ventura	72.7%	6.0%	8.3%	2.3%	3.1%	28.1%	3.7%	47%	1.6%

Source: UCLA Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies

While the report attempts to provide a critical analysis of the causes of poverty among women, it also offers some recommendations toward addressing the state of women in poverty in the region. These recommendations include support for unionization efforts in the region, such as the current organizing efforts by In-Home Supportive Service (IHSS) workers, and the need to make poverty among low-wage working women and low-wage workers in general a local policy priority.

The report's recommendations are not exhaustive of all possible policy and community/labor initiatives. It is our intention that they be further developed through further research and participatory discussions in the coming months. Some initial report recommendations include:

- Increase the state and federal minimum wage.
- Promote "high road" economic development strategies, which place a minimum performance standard on businesses receiving economic development subsidies.
- Promote unionization and collective bargaining.
- Support the adoption of local living wage ordinances.
- Expand education and training programs to provide lifelong education for work and the development of careers.
- Expand training programs designed to meet the special needs of immigrant women.
- Establish one or more community-based women workers resource centers providing for legal services and information on workers rights.
- Maintain Full Funding for CalWORKS college-based education and training programs instead of the cuts currently proposed in the governor's 2003 budget.
- Support the TANF Reauthorization that lifts women out of poverty, stops time clocks for higher education, respects reproductive rights, and rewards the work of caregiving.
- Stop the "clock" on the 5-year limit for CalWORKS who are in compliance.
- Guaranteed childcare to TANF recipients who are engaged in work activity.
- Remove all barriers to qualified legal immigrants' access to benefits.

This report begins to investigate regional manifestations of the feminization of poverty. As research committee members undertook their investigation, the need for additional research became clear. In some cases, statistics are lacking; in other cases, the existing data fails to address the meaning or experience of poverty for those who live under its shadow in the Ventura/Santa Barbara County region. We hope that this report helps inform local policy and community/labor initiatives, but it is also our desire to generate a dialogue about the plight of working poor women in our region and the development of new approaches to addressing poverty among working women. As this research project moves forward and work begins on next year's report, specific areas require additional research:

- A thorough labor market study investigating just how California's expanding new economy is affecting the regional labor market and to what degree our local education and training programs adequately meet the training needs of our expanding labor force.
- An analysis of regional 2000 income and demographic census data.
- Expanded research regarding the relationship between poverty and other related women's issues, such as education, domestic violence, affordable housing and transportation.
- Greater inclusion of the voices of working poor women through interviews and workplace diaries.

The primary research methodology used in this study has been participatory research. The purpose of participatory research is to engage subjects collectively (in this case working women, students, community and labor activists and academic researchers) in investigating reality in order to change it. For most of us, research was something foreign, an activity engaged in only when in school or as an expert or professional researcher. We learned, however, that we all have the power to illuminate complex issues. Creating knowledge is the first step toward transforming the conditions of our lives.

*Approximately 75% of Ventura County CalWORKS recipients are women. As a result of the strict time limits and the "work first" priority of immediate job placement, upon leaving welfare 47% received jobs in the low-wage service sector and 32% worked in retail. As a consequence, after one year 72% were living under the federal poverty level.*



*Union membership has a clear impact on workers' wages. In 1997, the average hourly wage in California for all unionized workers in the private sector was \$16.80, a full 20% higher than the average wage for non-unionized workers of \$13.93 an hour.*

# **CENTRAL COAST ALLIANCE UNITED FOR A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY**

**CAUSE** is a non-profit community planning and policy research center for the study and promotion of sustainable economic policy and community development activities in the Central Coast Region of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties. CAUSE defines sustainable economic development policies and activities as those that contribute to the development of a prosperous, just and environmentally sound regional economy. Established in May 2000 by the Ventura County Living Wage Coalition (VCLWC), a broad-based multi-ethnic coalition of fifty-one faith, union and community-based organizations, CAUSE has emerged as an important independent intermediary resource for positive social change in the region

CAUSE's program mission is to:

- Conduct community planning and policy research relevant to the long-term economic sustainability of the region.
- Provide popular education and public policy outreach for participating organizations, labor unions and the community at large.
- Provide community organization development assistance to participating organizations, including leadership development education, community organizing training, and organizational development technical assistance.

**Full report and information available at <http://www.coastalalliance.com>**