

Introductory Remarks

American Poverty and Gender: Government Control and Neglect of Women Living in Poverty

Nikki Reisch, Center for Human Rights and Global Justice

This event, *American Poverty and Gender: Government Control and Neglect of Women Living in Poverty*, is part of the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (CHRGJ) series on [American Poverty and Human Rights](#). It was the brainchild of a number of host organizations, including the Center for Reproductive Rights, CUNY Law School's Human Rights and Gender Justice Clinic, SIA Legal Team, Berkeley Law School's Center for Reproductive Rights and Justice, and National Advocates for Pregnant Women, as well as the CHRGJ.

The co-organizers share a commitment to increasing public attention to the experiences of women living in poverty in the United States and to examining the causes and consequences of poverty through a human rights lens. In particular, this discussion aims to shed light on the intersecting forms of marginalization and oppression experienced by women living in poverty and particularly women of color living in poverty in this country. The panelists address how gender, race, and class interact in the lives of women living in poverty in the United States, and operate to deprive women of numerous human rights, from the rights to privacy and health, to the rights to housing, employment, family life, and political participation. They also highlight how, against the odds—and as they have done for generations—women and allies today are doing tremendous work to organize and overcome these obstacles.

This event was organized on the heels of an official visit to the United States by the [UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights](#), NYU's very own Professor Philip Alston, in December 2017, which shined a spotlight on some of the most striking manifestations of persistent poverty and inequality in this country. By fostering this public discussion about gender, poverty and human rights, the co-organizers seek to encourage advocates and policy makers at the domestic and international levels to give these issues more weight and to adopt stronger recommendations going forward.

This discussion could not be timelier. While issues of gender, racial, and class discrimination are by no means new—indeed they have marked the history of this country since its very origins—we are living at a moment in which attacks on women, on people of color, on people living in poverty, are more brazen, more blatant, and perhaps more pernicious, than we have seen in decades.

The attacks are not just in the public sphere, in the media and online, but in the legislative arena and in the courts, at the federal, state, and local levels. As the speakers discuss, women are simultaneously over-surveilled and under-served, policed and neglected. The mistreatment of women ranges from the criminalization of pregnant women and mothers, to denial of reproductive justice, limitations on access to vital maternal care and health services, including abortion, and a child welfare system that punishes the poor.

Some of these issues have gotten more attention in recent months, as the #MeToo movement highlights both the egregious nature and the quotidian reality of harassment, abuse, and oppression that women experience—though for all the focus on high-profile stories about movie stars and political figures, too little attention has been paid to the daily experiences of women of color, low-wage workers, and those living in poverty, and the normalization of the discrimination and abuse that they experience at disproportionate rates.

This event also coincides with Black history month—a time when we are reminded, including by the important work of student activists on this campus and elsewhere, that #racism lives heretoo—that it is all too alive and kicking in 2018. We are reminded that a tremendous amount of work remains to be done, to achieve dignity and equality for all in this country, and that the gap between principle and practice is nowhere more apparent than in the continued oppression of women of color.

While we take stock of the immense challenges, we are seeing forms of mobilization, social action, and community organizing, which give us reason to be hopeful. Many of the panelists address ways in which their organizations, colleagues, communities, and allies are working creatively for change and resisting attempts to roll back the limited progress that has been made.

Why, one might ask, is poverty or the situation of women living in poverty in this country a *human rights* issue?

To many, it may seem that talking about poverty—let alone extreme poverty—in this, the “richest country on earth,” is misplaced, or should not take priority. The Center for Human Rights and Global Justice has chosen to [prioritize a focus on poverty in the United States](#) precisely because it exists in the shadow of excessive wealth, with all too real consequences for both the civil and political and the economic and social rights of millions in this country. In conjunction with the Center’s [Initiative on Inequality, the Global Economy, and Human Rights](#), by increasing attention to the human rights implications of poverty in the United States, the Center seeks to deepen its commitment to critically examine places and institutions of power and hold them to account.

All too often in the United States, in both public discourse and private exchanges, people compartmentalize various forms of oppression, taking a piecemeal approach to discrimination dictated by narrow legislative frameworks and legal terms—addressing discrimination based on race, or on gender or



on class, but not capturing the myriad and overlapping forms of discrimination that many of us face routinely, as individuals whose identities are complex and elude easy categorization.

Using the language of human rights not only allows us to discuss the experiences of women in a more holistic way, encompassing this intersectionality; it also allows us to connect the experiences of women here to the realities of women elsewhere in the world, to draw connections and to build alliances. It enables us to circumvent or surmount limitations in our domestic laws, to point out their shortcomings, and to leverage principles that have wide, global endorsement, even if they have yet to be enshrined in text by our Congress.

The lack of legal recognition of economic and social rights in the United States means that international advocacy can help to reframe issues and fill a gap, highlighting the interdependence of civil and political rights (like the rights to vote and to fair trial) with economic and social rights (like the rights to housing, food, and education).

It also reminds those of us in the international human rights community of the need to rectify biases in our own work that have left economic and social rights under-examined, under-researched, and under-resourced by human rights institutions.

Moreover, talking about poverty as a human rights issue reminds us of our humanity, and opens up new opportunities for advocacy—additional platforms for sharing stories, voicing the need for change, and garnering support that can translate into social and political pressure and policy change.

*February 27, 2018
NYU School of Law*