

By Salim Muwakkil

MOST CONTEMPORARY ANALYSES OF THE problems plaguing the African-American community have become increasingly focused on the plight of black males. But while black males bear much of the brunt of many social dislocations, black females face equally daunting, though apparently less "news-worthy," obstacles.

Living in a culture that still devalues their gender, race and class, African-American women are compound victims. Almost one-half of all African-American households are headed by women. The median income of these female heads of households was \$7,425 in 1980, according to Urban League figures, and is estimated to be only slightly higher in real terms today. African-American females are the leading players in the so-called "feminization of poverty."

Two-thirds of the estimated 4 million homeless in the country are families, and 40 percent of those families are African-American. In some large urban centers, the number of black homeless is closer to 70 percent of the total, and black families—that is, black women with children—make up the bulk of that population.

African-American females also are inordinately represented among victims of domestic violence and abuse. Increasing numbers are falling victim to criminal lifestyles. In fact, there are more black women currently incarcerated than ever before in U.S. history. Clearly, the black community's afflictions span the genders.

Still, black women are making substantial progress in many realms. For example, they attend colleges and universities at near-record levels. Meanwhile, the number of their male counterparts entering college has dropped precipitously in recent years. Black women are easily absorbed into the expanding—though still relatively low-paying—service sector of the U.S. economy, when they are able to enter the marketplace.

A widening range of college-educated females are assuming unprecedented positions of leadership within the black community as well as the community at large. And although they remain somewhat hampered by the obstacles of racism, black female professionals are making unprecedented gains.

"I found that the bank I worked for was gung-ho about my advancement only up to a certain point," says Emma Mitchell, a self-employed economist, "and at that point I knew it was time to get out." The Chicago-based Mitchell has found considerable success in forming her own business, and a surprising number of black female entrepreneurs share Mitchell's story.

Unhappy success: But for many of these black women, their unprecedented triumphs have a bittersweet quality. "The pool of eligible black men for black women gets smaller and smaller the further they go up the educational and career ladder," explains Joyce Ladner, a sociology professor at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University who has done extensive research on African-American women. In recent years the social gap has widened considerably as the educational distance between black men and women has increased. The American Council on Education's 1989 report charting the decline in the number of black male undergraduates has sparked a series of warnings about the

Men not the only victims of problems vexing blacks



study's dire social ramifications.

Many social analysts warn that the declining number of black men on college campuses will leave black women as a group not

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only better educated, but with higher incomes and more prestigious jobs and, probably, a greater share of leadership. This, they insist, will not be a good thing.

William Julius Wilson, professor of sociology and public policy at the University of Chicago and the author of several studies on the African-American community, says the growing imbalance is likely to increase

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"the social distance and hostility between men and women," harming "social integration within the black community as a whole."

This social distance is aggravated by the accelerating deterioration in the plight of the black male. The statistics are grim but apparently are becoming well-known to many Americans. For instance, it has recently become common knowledge that homicide is the leading cause of death for black men. But this wider acknowledgement of the problem seems to have done little to inspire the consideration of serious solutions.

Narrowing the gap: Black women's organizations are among the few groups seeking such solutions. For example, conferees at the recently concluded Black Women's Political Action Forum held in Washington, D.C., were surprised to find the problems of the black male as an agenda item for the first time in the group's history. The forum is a joint undertaking of four of the most prominent sororities among African-Americans—Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Sigma Gamma Rho and Zeta Phi Beta—and has historically limited its range of concerns to matters related mostly to college-trained black females.

"Our board decided to take some action on the deep crisis that has trapped our black men," explains Alonda Cannady, the eastern regional representative for Delta Sigma Theta and an organizer of the conference.

"It's becoming clearer and clearer that all of us, male as well as female, have to rise if we as a people are going to make progress," Cannady says. "We simply can't do it one gender at a time." Since many of the black community's high achievers are sprinkled liberally throughout these four service-oriented sororities, their views illustrate a growing determination among nominal haves to reach back for the have-nots.

The November 1989 issue of *Essence*, "the magazine for today's black women," features an indigo-hued photograph of a brooding black man on the cover to illustrate a series of articles on his brethren's increasingly desperate plight. "Our men, in love, in trouble," the headline laments. Even the high-level tensions that once charged much of the discourse between feminist-inspired black women and black nationalist-inspired men seem to be abating somewhat as the consensus grows about the nature of the problem.

No jobs: In *Women and Children Last: The Plight of Poor Women in Affluent America*, sociologist Ruth Sidel concludes that unemployment among black males is the primary reason for the skyrocketing growth in families headed by black women. Black male unemployment, Sidel writes, is "astronomical," adding that such a "shockingly high rate of male unemployment has had a direct bearing on the dramatic rise in black female-headed families."

The University of Chicago's Wilson has also done research on what he terms a "male marriageable pool index" (MMPI). Wilson has found that young, inner-city black women—like their older college-educated counterparts—are confronting a shrinking pool of economically stable, or "marriageable," men. His findings correlate a low MMPI directly to the rise in black female-headed families.

In a special issue devoted to issues of race, class and gender discrimination in the U.S., *The Nation* in July published a series of articles guest-edited by Jewell Handy Gresham and Margaret B. Wilkerson, two well-known black feminist scholars and teachers. The issue focused on many issues of concern among black women: the politics of family, the enduring nature of racial stereotypes, the vexing dilemma of public education, etc. But the concern that attracted the clearest focus was the problem of black males. "The term 'feminization of poverty,' which was devised to describe the significant numbers of women and children living in poverty, is a distortion that negates the role played by racial barriers to black employment, particularly among males," Wilkerson and Gresham write in the opening essay. "The feminization of poverty is real, but the racialization of poverty is at its heart. To discuss one without the other is to play a mirror game with reality."

Black women with children are among the poorest segments of this society, but, according to a study by the *New England Economic Review*, almost as large a percentage of the black female population was employed in 1984 as that of white females, and their median income was 90 percent that of white women's. By contrast, the study continued, just over 59 percent of all black men had jobs, compared with more than 72 percent of white men, and their median income was 32 percent less than that of white male workers.

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By David Moberg

WASHINGTON

THERE'S A SIMPLE NAME FOR THE NEWEST strategy electric companies are using to deal with state regulators: blackmail. If commercially available energy-efficient technologies were fully used, experts believe, the U.S. could cut electricity use by three-fourths. But utilities, which could speed such a transition and often reap benefits in the long run, are resisting serious cooperation. Rather than serve the public interest, they are using their monopoly power to hold communities hos-

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tage to their outdated policies unless they can make even bigger profits from conservation than from traditional power production.

For much of this century, increasing electricity consumption seemed to work to everyone's advantage: electricity rates dropped as more power plants were built. But that old illusion shattered as the costs of fossil fuels and of nuclear power plant construction soared, and the perils of nuclear waste and global warming grew more acute.

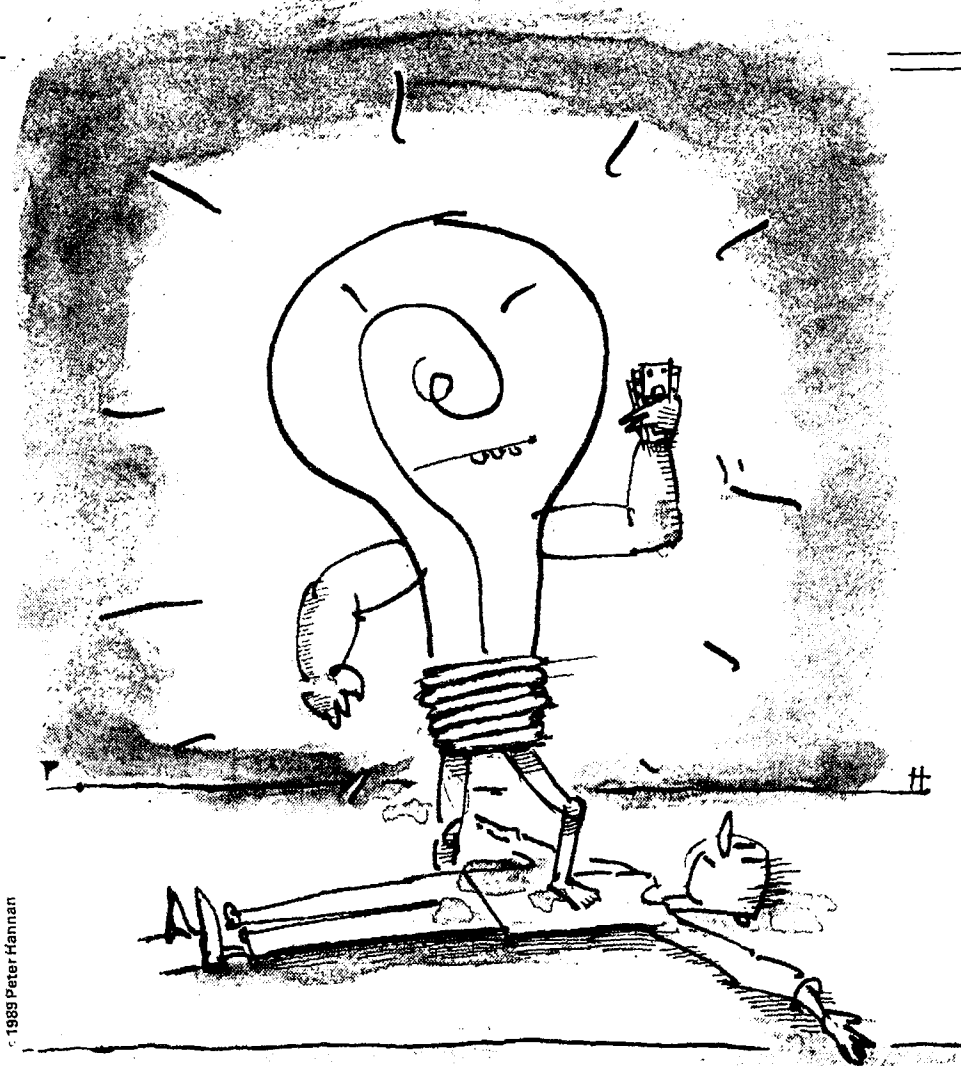
It has become increasingly clear that enhancing energy efficiency is cheaper than building new power plants, and often even cheaper than operating existing ones. For example, in many cases electric utilities could literally give away a new, expensive, long-lasting 15-watt compact fluorescent bulb that gives off the same light as a typical 60-watt incandescent bulb—and at less cost to themselves than running their generators to provide the extra 45 watts. So why don't they?

In a very few cases they do, usually motivated not by social benefits but by regulation or financial pressures. Over the past decade 37 states have required utilities to pursue "least-cost energy plans." Now eight states have moved even further, requiring "all-source integrated bidding," which means utilities must bid against independent power producers or companies that offer energy-conservation means, such as more efficient motors and lights or building weatherization. In one such integrated bid in Maine recently, four of the 10 lowest bids offered ways to reduce demand, not produce more power.

Advantages of efficiency: These regulatory pressures have slowed the demand for new power plants and saved consumers a lot of money. California was an early innovator, pushing efficiency as early as 1973: its utility conservation programs were cutting consumer bills \$840 million a year by 1985, according to the California Energy Commission. The amount of energy required to produce a dollar's worth of goods or services had dropped 35 percent since 1973—a rate faster than the national average—saving Californians \$23 billion over that time and increasing the state's competitive advantage.

But this is only a hint of what could be done. Even at the high point of their investment, major California utilities spent no more than 1.25 percent of their revenue on conservation. Then from 1984 to 1988, major utilities' conservation spending fell 56 percent, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).

The utilities have hardly exhausted their conservation options. Japan and Germany already consume electricity at half the U.S. rate, boosting their industries' efficiency without decreasing their standard of living. The NRDC estimates that currently available technology could save a startling 92 percent



Electric companies see utility of blackmail

of electricity used in commercial lighting and 82 percent of energy used by refrigerators.

Until now the focus has been on residential over commercial savings. But Ted Flanigan, director of the energy program at Amory Lovins's Rocky Mountain Institute, sees industry as the next frontier in reaching his estimate of a potential 75 percent reduction in electricity use. "Electric motors use as much primary fuel as all the highway vehicles [cars and trucks] in the U.S.," he said, "and electric motors consume half of U.S. electricity. It is possible with available technology to save 44 percent of that."

Electric utilities have done little to promote efficiency because they sell electricity as a commodity. In general, the more they sell, the more money they make. New power plants go into the utilities' "rate base," the total utility expenditure on which they're guaranteed a profit. The bigger the rate base, the fatter the profit. The catch is that no business or household consumers ever want to buy more kilowatt-hours in the abstract. They simply want the services—light, power, heating, cooling—that electricity provides.

Next year's model: Critics argue that utilities should be redesigned on a public-service model, enabling people to do what they want with energy at the lowest possible cost. Experience shows that most energy users demand unrealistically quick (less than two-year) returns on energy-efficiency investments such as new windows or insulation, or they can't easily afford such improvements. Often the interests of the final bill-payers—renters, for instance—differ from those of building owners, who seek low initial costs rather than long-term efficiency. Utilities can easily raise capital and live with a 15-year payback. But if efficiency leads to lower sales and eventually to lower profits, utilities resist, draining their local economies and subjecting themselves to the costly risk of building more power plants.

In California, "even extremely inexpensive conservation remains blocked by market barriers" despite regulatory guarantees to utilities against revenue loss from conservation, according to Chris Calwell and Ralph Cavanagh of NRDC. They reluctantly argue that "it is necessary to pay utilities 'extra' in

Many utilities use their monopoly power to hold communities hostage to their outdated and inefficient—but profitable—policies.

order to induce them to pursue what amount to cost-minimizing strategies."

"I think there's a lot of blackmailing going on," observes Ted Flanigan. "When you look at the utility as a franchise, we are somewhat at their mercy." He quotes John Rowe, chairman of the New England Electrical System—now a major conservation promoter—as saying, "I am like a rat. If there's a big piece of cheese building more power plants, I'll do that. If there's a bigger piece of cheese selling efficiency, I'll do that."

Ordered by regulators to invest in efficiency, some utilities have made the least productive investments, fattening their rate base while minimizing conservation. So most efficiency advocates want utilities to be allowed to include efficiency investments in their rate base only when they meet efficiency and environmental performance standards.

Although such conservation is better than business as usual, there is an alternative. "I tend to favor municipalization, because municipal utilities obviously don't have the [profit- or sales-] maximizing mandate," Flanigan says. "Municipal utilities [which gen-

erate 15 percent of the nation's power] can really do what is in society's best interests."

For example, the municipal utility in Burlington, Vt., buys and installs energy-efficient lighting equipment that it then leases for less than the cost of the energy savings. The municipal utility of Osage, Iowa, wanted to keep townspeople's money at home: its aggressive promotion of insulation, subsidized efficient lighting and other efficiency measures now saves the town of 3,800 about \$1.2 million a year. At the same time—unlike private utilities—it has reduced rates. Although the NRDC criticizes the Los Angeles municipal utility for skimpy efficiency investment, public power companies across the country have been among the leaders in promoting energy efficiency.

The city that works? The two issues—energy efficiency and public ownership—have been joined in Chicago. The city's franchise with Commonwealth Edison expires at the end of next year. Com Ed successfully pushed through a huge nuclear-power expansion program that now leaves it with 30 or more percent excess capacity at peak demand and rates that are among the highest in the country, costing the city many industrial jobs. But the 1948 franchise gives the city the right to buy a share of Com Ed at the bargain price of the original investment.

Energy consultant Charles Komanoff, in a study for the city, found that city electricity users could save substantially with an aggressive conservation program no matter who owns the system. But with its overbuilt nuclear plants Com Ed has continued to heavily promote electricity use, sabotage cogeneration efforts (independent power production from waste steam) and resist conservation (an outside consultant lambasted its state-mandated program as lackadaisical and poorly conceived).

Komanoff's study showed that a municipal buyout of part of Com Ed would be feasible and far cheaper than continuing business as usual. Despite the attempt by Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D-IL) to block municipalization for his friends at Com Ed by severely limiting use of tax-exempt bonds, municipal ownership with aggressive promotion of efficiency could be the cheapest alternative, Komanoff believes. In any case, even if the city negotiates a new franchise, a serious takeover threat is its main leverage with Com Ed. Mayor Richard Daley has finally promised to notify Com Ed that the city intends to acquire the utility—as recommended by a broad-based mayoral task force—but so far has given no indication he intends to put teeth behind that bark.

Com Ed is fighting hard, labeling municipal-ownership advocates "extremists," advertising heavily and threatening to withhold taxes. Elsewhere private utilities have fought against a new wave of interest in municipalization. The public takeover of Long Island Lighting Co. as part of shutting down New York's Shoreham nuclear plant was sidetracked by Gov. Mario Cuomo. New Orleans is likely to take over its utility, but the company is still trying to saddle the city with the costs of a white-elephant nuclear plant. Albuquerque, N.M., and San Diego are other cities considering takeovers.

Electric utilities will eventually be dragged, kicking and screaming, toward energy efficiency. Rather than cooperate for the public good, most will use their monopoly privileges to extort as much as possible. Despite their own shortcomings, publicly owned systems seem more prepared to act as utilities should—as services to the public. □