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Hispanic Mothers Lagging as Others Escape Welfare



By RACHEL L. SWARNS

For years, Ramona Rosario could savor the English-speaking world only through the soap operas flickering on her battered television set. Her husband refused to let her work, study English or venture beyond their Hispanic neighborhood in the Bronx.

And when she finally left him, more than a decade after she emigrated from the Dominican Republic, she had no job skills, no English language skills and no way to survive without a welfare check.

These days, Ms. Rosario studies English with 14 other Hispanic welfare mothers struggling to break into the work force. But as the unskilled women painstakingly fill their notebooks at Bronx Community College, many say they fear they may never put the shame of government charity behind them.

"I feel stuck," Ms. Rosario, 42, said in Spanish as she wearily listed the supermarkets, hospitals and clothing stores that have refused to hire her. "Sometimes, I think we're all stuck."

While white and black single mothers have left the welfare rolls in droves over the last three years, the number of Hispanic single mothers on public assistance has held almost stubbornly steady. And the disparity highlights a widening ethnic divide among New York City's poorest families.

Since 1995, the number of white single mothers on welfare has fallen 57 percent; the number of blacks has declined 30 percent and the number of Hispanic single mothers has dipped just 7 percent, city officials say. Monday, the welfare rolls are 5 percent white, 33 percent black and 59 percent Hispanic, with more Hispanic parents receiving public assistance in New York City than in Miami or Los Angeles or the entire state of Texas.

The stark statistics reflect the struggles of thousands of welfare mothers like Ms. Rosario and her classmates, who arrived in America with gilded dreams only to find themselves trapped in poverty and crumbling tenements. Speaking little English and lacking the education, work experience and support systems of their black and white counterparts, most have failed to find work or other means of support, census data and city and state statistics show.

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani often describes the overall 36 percent drop in the city's welfare rolls as one of his most important accomplishment, proof that the poor can successfully move from dependency to self-reliance. But the troubles of the Hispanic welfare mothers underscore the challenges that remain as Giuliani works toward his goal of moving all 200,000 welfare mothers into jobs, or at least workfare positions, by the year 2000.

In recent years, the number of Hispanic women on public assistance has surged, fueled largely by the doubling of the number of Dominican immigrants receiving government assistance from 1990 to 1996, census data indicate.

Puerto Ricans still make up the majority of Hispanic people on public assistance, according to a census analysis conducted by demographers at Queens College. But their numbers have held relatively steady, compared with the rapid rise of Dominicans, the city's fastest-growing group of immigrants, who typically speak less English and experience higher levels of poverty and unemployment than other Hispanic people.

And so far, city officials have been unprepared to meet their needs. This year, the city turned away hundreds of Spanish-speaking welfare mothers from English classes because they had more students than seats.

Hundreds more were denied access to résumé-writing courses and vocational training -- services available to English-speaking welfare mothers -- because most programs cannot accommodate students with limited English skills, city officials said.

Recognizing the need for additional programs, city officials say they have budgeted for a significant expansion of services to this population over the next 10 months. But Ms. Rosario's story also demonstrates how some women stumble over cultural roadblocks of their own, clinging to traditional views of motherhood that sometimes discourage them from seeking jobs or taking advantage of city training programs.

On the sidewalks of upper Manhattan and the Bronx, where street vendors sell sugar cane and sweet perfume, some welfare mothers hold fast to ideals from their homelands, seeing their primary role as stay-at-home mothers, and viewing day care centers and baby sitters with deep distrust.

And that view, welfare specialists and sociologists say, is sometimes reinforced by husbands and boyfriends who prefer their wives and girlfriends to tend children instead of working.

Maribel Baez, 29, who dreamed of learning English and data processing, put those goals aside when her husband, a truck driver, asked her to stay home with their two children. It was an easy decision, she said. She loved caring for her babies.

But now, eight years later, Ms. Baez says she is paying the price. Divorced and on the dole, she anguishes over letters in English from the welfare office, struggling to sound out the words she cannot understand.

And when she walks timidly into clothing stores looking for work, the onslaught of rapid-fire English often leaves her head spinning. Competition for jobs is so fierce in the poor neighborhoods where Hispanic welfare mothers live that some supermarket managers want even their employees who bag groceries to speak English.

"I feel awful, depressed, all of that," said Ms. Baez, who emigrated 11 years ago and now combines English studies with a workfare job. "I cry at home alone."

But when asked whether she wanted to work full time, if she could find a job that would get her off welfare, Ms. Baez shook her head. "It's too many hours," she said. "I need to be with my children."

City officials say they have already begun to tackle the obstacles encountered by some Hispanic women. To make Hispanic welfare mothers more marketable, city officials plan to expand the number of work-study programs to accommodate 6,019 students in English classes this fiscal year, which began in July, a 25 percent increase over the previous year.

And the city's vocational training programs, which could accept only 160 Spanish speakers, will admit 1,225 this fiscal year, according to city officials.

But state statistics suggest that this expansion may leave thousands of Hispanic welfare mothers without language classes and training. Although New York City has begun to examine some of the barriers preventing welfare mothers from finding jobs, state social service officials conducted a comprehensive survey of those very issues seven years ago.

The state study, which surveyed 815 welfare mothers in New York City, found that 80 percent of the Hispanic women were born overseas. Thirty percent lacked ninth grade educations compared with nine percent of non-Hispanic women.

And at a time when manufacturing and garment industry jobs were vanishing, the officials reported that nearly half of all Hispanic women had most recently worked in factories, but 60 percent of non-Hispanic women had more marketable skills, having worked as clerical workers, store clerks or cooks.

"Hispanics are considerably less likely than other recipients to have acquired from their jobs the kinds of skills that are in demand in New York City's service-based economy," the state researchers wrote in their report, adding that limited educations left Hispanic welfare mothers at "severe disadvantage."

The study also reported that more subtle, cultural obstacles sometimes blocked Hispanic women from leaving the welfare rolls, including distrust of day care and low self-confidence.

Seventy-five percent of Hispanic mothers feared their that children would be mistreated in day care, compared with 45 percent of non-Hispanic mothers. And about 45 percent of Hispanic women feared they could not perform as well as others at work, compared with 26 percent of non-Hispanic women.

Concentrated in neighborhoods where they can buy groceries, rent apartments and enjoy television and radio without speaking English, many Hispanic welfare mothers, the study also noted, can get by without learning the language, until they have to find work.

Consequently, nearly half of all Hispanic welfare mothers could not speak English well, even though many had lived in New York City for years. And nearly 76 percent of Dominicans, who are more recent immigrants, struggled with the new language, the state statistics showed.

"The administration is trying to move aggressively on this, because if you don't

speak English, how can I move you toward employment?" said Georgia Salley, who runs the city's work-study programs for welfare recipients.

"The challenge is to put more classes and vocational training geared toward people with limited language skills so they have a better chance of finding jobs," Ms. Salley said, "but it doesn't happen in a blink of an eye."

But advocates for the poor say city officials have known about the shortage of services for years. In 1991, state officials called for an expansion of education and training programs for Hispanic welfare mothers. And in 1994, lawyers for the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund filed a Federal lawsuit charging state and city officials with failing to provide such services.

That lawsuit, which was based on existing Federal laws, was withdrawn as city officials expanded their programs and the new welfare law was enacted in 1996. But the issue has acquired only greater urgency since then. Under the new rules, welfare mothers can receive cash benefits for only five years. And as the clock ticks, some advocates and sociologists worry: Will Hispanic welfare mothers be ready for a post-welfare world?

"As a sociologist, it worries me; as an individual, it worries me," said Ramona Hernandez, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, who recently published a study about the struggles of Dominican immigrants in New York City. "It's the future of a people we are dealing with here."

And in the classrooms at Bronx Community College, where single mothers studying English know their time on welfare is running out, the anxiety is palpable.

Some women try to focus on the success stories, on welfare mothers like Carmen Yangas, 37, who was hired as a secretary at the college after taking classes there. Others, like Ms. Rosario, dab their faces with holy water and pray to their saints for work.

Another woman, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said she simply tries to wipe her memory clean of all the job rejections and all the hours waiting for the one phone call that never comes.

"Hope is the last thing you lose," said the woman, a 40-year-old mother of four, her brown eyes flashing fiercely. "I'm going to find work. I have no choice."

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