

## Kentucky and Kentucky Women

Kentucky is one of only 15 states in which more than one-half (55 percent) of the residents live in non-metro areas, and 68 percent of the residents live in places of less than 25,000 people (USDA, 2007). Appalachia is a large geographic region that includes an area 600 miles long, 250 miles wide and comprising 220,000 square miles in twelve states: Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, South Carolina, and Mississippi (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2006). The Appalachian region of Kentucky, located in the eastern and northeastern parts of the state, is noted for persistent, high poverty rates, lack of industrial diversity and community development, and high unemployment. Appalachia counties with relatively higher rates of poverty are generally concentrated in Kentucky, as well as West Virginia, southern Ohio, and Mississippi (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2003). In fact, in 2006, the poverty rate for Kentucky was 15 percent while the poverty rate was higher in Appalachia Kentucky at 24 percent, a stark contrast to the U.S. poverty rate of 12.6 percent (ARC, 2006; US Bureau, 2007).

Similarities between Appalachia Kentucky and other rural areas include low population density, low levels of education, poor health status relative to urban areas, greater distance from formal health care services than in urban areas, and fewer services than in urban areas (Bagby, 1988; Deleon, Wakefield, Schultz, Williams, & VandenBos, 1989; Raitz & Ulack, 1984). Other features found in Appalachia Kentucky which are common to many rural areas, are high poverty rates, breakdown of the traditional kinship structures, out-migration from the geographic region, and distrust of outsiders. All of these factors place Appalachians at high risk for untreated physical health, mental health, and other problems (Keefe, 1988a, 1988b; Hoover et al., 1988). The Rural School and Community Trust (2003) has identified rural Kentucky and other Appalachia states in need of “rural education policy attention” because of the very high rates of poverty and distress and low per capita income.

Kentucky is ranked 42<sup>nd</sup> in the nation in the number of children living in poverty (Kids Count Databook, 2006). Most of the poor children in Kentucky are living in single-parent families with a mother as the head of the household, and 89 percent of these women receive public assistance (Kentucky Youth Advocates, 2004). Women traditionally earn lower wages, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. A relationship has been identified between a child’s educational achievement and family public assistance (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2000). The National Education Longitudinal Study (see Jordan and Nettles, 1999) indicates that family socioeconomic status is a predictor of academic performance. Specifically, students raised in low-income families did not perform as well on math and science skills tests as their peers from higher socioeconomic status families. Schools use eligibility for free and reduced lunch as an indicator of low-income family socioeconomic status. Currently, 69 percent of Kentucky elementary and secondary students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (Education Watch, 2004) while eligibility is an alarming 76 percent among rural Appalachia students (Rural Trust, 2005). Girls from low-income families are at great risk for poor academic achievement. These girls may not have as many educational opportunities as their

economically advantaged peers and are not encouraged by teachers to take advanced coursework as they progress in their educational development (Cook & Kaffenberger, 2003).

Research suggests that Kentucky women find it difficult to achieve and excel in a variety of educational and occupational arenas. For example, a study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2004), established baseline measures for the status of women in each of the 50 states, Kentucky women ranked 45<sup>th</sup> or lower on most important measures. Kentucky ranked 36<sup>th</sup> in the number of women in poverty, specifically, in 2002, 13.5 percent of Kentucky women were living in poverty compared to 9.5 percent of Kentucky men. In the U.S., 12.1 percent of the women were living in poverty compared to 8.7 percent men (The Status of Women in the States, 2004). Kentucky also ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in the number of women with four or more years of college; 46<sup>th</sup> in the number of women-owned businesses; 25<sup>th</sup> in the number of women who hold managerial and professional jobs; and according to the Center for American Women and Politics, in 2003, Kentucky ranked 48<sup>th</sup> in the number of women in state legislature. Despite more women becoming leaders in their communities, moving into the workforce and earning college degrees, wages for women continue to be depressed. For example, in 2002, the median weekly wages for women was \$809 compared to \$1089 for men (Women in The Labor Force, 2004).

Tickameyer and Tickameyer's (1991) study of gender, family structure, and poverty in Central Appalachia, from the secondary work as cited in *A Contextual Analysis of the Effects of Gender and Place on Workers Incomes*, suggests that the more traditional family life and gender roles—which are characteristic in Appalachia—when combined with the more limited opportunities for employment in the region, place women at greater risk for economic instability. In Appalachia Kentucky, females appear to have difficulty setting and achieving educational and occupational goals—particularly in non-traditional arenas. Photiadis (1986) reported that despite the breakdown of the traditional family structure and increased employment by women outside of the home, traditional values and gender roles were still prevalent in Appalachia including more rigid forms of societal, sex-role, and occupational stereotypes. Young women in Appalachia are likely to encounter greater barriers to academic achievement and career development. The available sex role models that are more traditional and gender role expectations that are more rigid complicate this. Thus, these young women are less likely to consider non-traditional areas like science.