

# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## Women in poverty search for means to end plight

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Staff writer

ROCHESTER — When Ida Luz Cotto was a 17-year-old high school senior, her boyfriend used to reset the alarm clock in their bedroom so she wouldn't wake up in time to go to school.

"Maybe he just wanted me to stay with him," speculated the 31-year-old single mother of two children, who now lives in an apartment on the city's northeast side.

Luz Cotto noted that when she was 17, she was rebellious, pregnant and at odds with her family. She went to live at the home of her boyfriend's sister after her mother kicked her out of their home.

With a mere two months before graduation, Luz Cotto quit high school and began a downward spiral into poverty — a spiral that accelerated once her relationship ended with the child's father five years after they met.

Since then, Luz Cotto has been in and out of abusive relationships with men, and on and off welfare. Today, she is trying to make up for the time she lost by sleeping in those mornings years ago by working 20 hours a week part time and using a government aid program to attend Monroe Community College to obtain her high school equivalency diploma.

Luz Cotto admits she lives a stressful life that often leaves her tired and depressed, but she emphasized that she's had enough of living on various forms of public assistance and depending on men who might leave her to her survive on her own.

One day, she hopes to move out of her crime-ridden neighborhood and the apartment in which she sometimes wakes up in the middle of the night to the sound of scurrying rats.

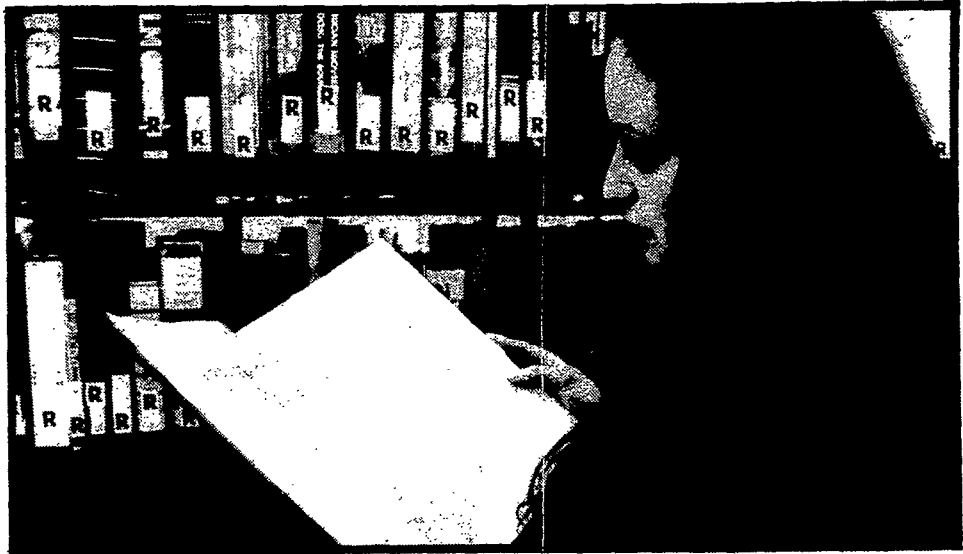
"I saw this guy who had been stabbed across the street," Luz Cotto said as she sat on the couch in the living room of her second-story flat, her homework strewn across her lap. "I deserve a better place."

Finding a better place for impoverished women in the world was the concern of more than 150 participants at a "Conference on the Feminization of Poverty," which was presented at Corpus Christi Church, 864 E. Main St., on Saturday, March 2. The conference's sponsors included 14 Catholic organizations, parish committees and diocesan groups.

Luz Cotto was one of the participants — more than 99 percent of whom were women — who swapped stories of their experiences and observations in the current economic system, as well as solutions they have found to the situations that confront so many women today.

To inspire such conversations, a conference segment featured three female speakers who related being left by men and thrown into the marketplace with skills inadequate for decent-paying jobs. Eventually, the women found varying degrees of security by tapping into the economic, educational and support services available through government programs, community organizations and churches.

In particular, conference speakers highlighted women's need to foster self-esteem and cooperation in order to overcome the "feminization of poverty."



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer  
Ida Luz Cotto looks over a book in the Monroe Community College library.



Ida Luz Cotto must unscrew the light bulb when she doesn't need light in her bedroom. Her daughter, Alisha Ida Sosa, sleeps hidden in the blankets on the bed.

That term became a sociological buzzword in recent years after being coined by Diana Pearce, author of *The Feminization of Poverty: Women, Work and Welfare*. Pearce was one of several researchers and commentators who pointed throughout the last decade to a growing number of women — particularly single mothers — who are trapped by poverty.

Observers of the impoverished landscape that is home to millions of U.S. women say several factors have combined to make women constitute more than two-thirds of the nation's poor adults, and leave 12 million children below the poverty level.

Teen pregnancy is one major factor in the growing impoverishment of women, according to Sandra Hanson, an assistant professor of sociology at Catholic University of America, in Washington, D.C. Hanson, who has researched gender roles and the feminization of poverty, noted that despite a stable U.S. birth rate throughout the last decade, more and more children were born to unmarried mothers who, on average, were younger each year.

Experts point to increased sexual activity among younger people — fostered in part by peer pressure and societal mores — combined with a lack of early sex education to create a climate in which many young girls get pregnant and in which many young fathers feel no obligation to help them.

Poor women especially, Hanson said, have little incentive to marry the fathers of their children because the males may not make — or lack the skills and ability eventually to earn — enough money to support a child.

In addition, the welfare systems of most states discourage young men from living with the mothers of their children, she said. Households can lose such public-assistance benefits as Medicaid if they earn too much money to qualify for welfare, she commented.

And in a society, various observers said, marked by sex discrimination, poor women struggle even more than poor men because of a lack of employer-provided day care and an economy that is experiencing the bulk of its employment growth in low-paying service jobs.

In its fact sheet "Women, Work and Poverty," the National Commission on Working Women of Wider Opportunities for Women reported that the vast majority of working women are employed in low-paying clerical,

Continued on page 14



After getting up at 5:15 a.m., Luz Cotto rushes to catch the bus to work.