

Chairs and Members of the Committees,

Opinions are shaped by experience, yet we do not all have the same experiences. Poverty is an abstract thing people theorized about when they haven't lived it themselves. Poverty is something that if you haven't lived it, you don't really understand it. And it's frightening to imagine that people who can make what can be decisions for others between life and slavery, can be ill-informed about what poverty really is.

I'd like to share the world of poverty that tens of thousands of kids in this state live in, who are unable to testify, to provide context.

Poverty is like a backpack full of bricks on your back. After years of carrying the backpack, your back is aching, the pain continues, and your back becomes crooked from carrying the load for so long. Poverty drags down your self-esteem to levels so low you would think you're a slave, because you're willing to do whatever it takes to keep yourself afloat—even if that means giving in to tolerating situations your pride would never allow for, if you had any self-respect, or living a lifestyle you never wanted. It's incredibly depressing, and after years and years, you feel like the bottom of the shoes that people walk on—being walked into the ground. Coming out of that mindset and depression is extremely difficult. It's all around you in the impoverished town you live in, in the hopeless lives of the people all around you, and in the conditions of the apartment, trailer, or shack you live in.

If you're young, it follows you to school with your clothes that don't fit, are full of holes, and are out of style which you are reminded of by being repeatedly bullied and judged. It's a humiliating witness to your free or reduced school lunch line or food selection. It's the degradation in the classroom where you don't read as well as the other kids whose parents have time to read with them at night. It comes home with you alone because no one wants to hang out with the poor kid, you, or with your impoverished and likely minimally parented and therefore sketchy friends. It's the heartache and hunger you feel at night as you cry yourself to sleep in your sleeping bag because mom is working the late shift. And it wakes you up in the morning with the chills because there is no heat. It's the only way of life you know—surviving, but at the same time embarrassed and ashamed in front of those who are more fortunate. Ashamed that you are who you are. It's not even in your mind to do anything else but just barely exist, because the possibility to have more than what you have now, is only a movie on a cable TV you don't have. You are no one and you don't mean anything to anyone, and the wealthy or middle class are all someone. That's the cast-thinking that poverty sets into place in your mind when you've been growing up with it for years and years. If you have nothing else in the environment you're living in to trigger any other thought in your mind to value yourself, you could be trapped into this mindset for life. You become what your parents think of you, what others imagine you as—not much. And in order for you to value yourself again as a human being, sometimes someone else

has to point out your value to snap you out of it, and make you feel like you are somehow significant. When you live in a world of limitations, your mind becomes enslaved to the idea that you can never be more than your environment and your circumstances, because nothing in your life shows you otherwise.

I came from a home with two very educated parents. My mother has a Master's degree in Art Education, and my father has two PhD's, one in Economics and the other in Statistics. My mother tried following all the rules in life: getting an education, getting married, having children with one man, and trying to be a good housewife. But after 23 years of marriage, my mother became a single parent working six days a week with long hours every day, for minimum wage, because she had not worked for years and her work experience was limited. She would leave at 4:30 in the morning to do manual labor all day, and come home at 7pm exhausted, too exhausted to parent me. I raised myself for the most part, making my own dinners nightly by the time I was 12. Dinner options were limited. There were no side dishes. No dessert. We lived in a run-down trailer with holes in the wall where the wall had rotted through. The mice were making nests in the other parts of the wall which provided wonderful entertainment for my cat. We were often cold in the winter as the heat escaped the trailer and the critters from outside would crawl into our floor vents. We had limited family outings, and limited family pictures, since there were not many opportunities for a parent to take pictures of their kids if they're always at work.

Mom didn't have time to read with me as a kid because she was too busy trying to earn money to pay rent and utilities. My 4th grade teacher asked me more than once to read out loud a passage from a text book and asked a follow-up question that I couldn't answer. In reality, I was so nervous about reading out loud perfectly, so I wouldn't embarrass myself in front of the class further beyond my obvious poverty compared to kids who came from the middle-income households, that I didn't absorb anything I read. The teacher concluded, of course, that I don't understand the text, and I was deemed to have a learning disability. As it turned out, if she had asked me to read it to myself, I understood perfectly what I read. And so I did not advance to the gifted and talented classes, while the kids whose parents could afford to stay home and read with their kids, did advance.

My mother's long work hours and the fact that she was my only source of transportation created outcomes that left me out of many opportunities. My mother could never attend a PTA meeting, and only once took me to school on her own for a school event. My ability to visit a public library when I was young was extremely limited, and sometimes impossible. Even when I rarely had the opportunity to go to the library, I was uninterested in reading books about Nancy Drew and other kid-selection choices the library provided when I was knee deep in real life problems. There was almost no access to after school activities. The first time I played a school sport or after school activity was when the school paid for the attire and equipment. That was when I moved to lived with my unemployed father, who had time to pick me up after practice. That was

9th grade. I had delayed access to technology. The first time I had a color TV was when I was in college, and the first time I owned my own laptop was when I was 27—in 2005.

In high school, there is no such thing as a life skills class, although there should be. So anything you need to know about the world, if it's not taught to you by your parents, like how to manage finances, you will have to find out on your own, the hard way.

To shed light on the real frustrations living in poverty means to kids in high school, here are my journal articles from high school:

“School is no longer fun. It’s competitive and spiteful and capitalistic. People who are good and smart fall through the cracks and the ones on top don’t care because they’ve never had to worry that much about their survival.”

“I’m worried. I’m worried about everything under the sun. I’m worried about paying off my credit card bill, paying the bank, paying paying paying. I’m worried that if I stop supporting Mom, she won’t be able to have a phone line and won’t have a way to pay rent and become more depressed than she is. I’m so depressed just thinking about all the crap we’ve been through. I feel like Frank McCourt sitting in the bar with all those spoiled college brats talking about Camous. They’ve had the luxury of being able to do and study and buy whatever the hell they wanted. I still have yet to have my own computer, buy my own car—hell, drive someone else’s car even—and I hate having to be a beggar and always be borrowing rides off of people. I hate being poor when everyone else my age is doing whatever they want and enjoying their heads off. I hate feeling out of place and like a second-hand citizen.”

“Mom’s moving in with me, finally. She decided to come after she had no other alternative. She ... I wonder if she got kicked out of her place or what happened. All I know is that she was crying on the phone when she called me to tell me—I could hear her sniffing. She felt a bit degraded, I suppose, having to move into her youngest daughter’s place and all... but I’m glad she’s here. I don’t want Mom to NOT have any savings for herself when she has to retire because she can’t keep any of her jobs for z reason. I want her to feel comfortable, to live comfortably for once.”

After I graduated college, I had no real career path and worked part-time in retail. Here is a journal entry reflecting my experience:

“I am lying in a sleeping bag in my brother’s apartment, hands folded under my head. I stare at the ceiling and ponder life. And as I write this, a fast-running tippy-toe roach runs under my bags and suitcases with my stuff. My brother’s place: an iron and sheet on the living room floor, acting as the ironing board. The only other thing on the floor is my crap against the wall. The

neighbor upstairs is still up, pacing back and forth, thud, thud, thud... And of course the occasional roach and frequent beetle.”

Having lived in poverty for many years still affects me every day, sometimes in negative ways. My posture is poor at times and I have to consciously make an effort to sit up straight. I’m hyper-aware of making room for others when walking on the sidewalks, as if I have to apologize for taking up any space in the world. I find myself saying “thank you” too much, and being too apologetic, to the annoyance of others. I never ask strangers to do something on my behalf. For example, a woman seated in the window seat on a flight I was on asked me to re-arrange the carry-on luggage she had not placed correctly in the overhead compartment, since she had already sat down in her seat, and I was sitting in the aisle seat. I would have never asked someone to do something like that for me, because that’s the middle-class sense of privilege I never grew up with. I cannot relate to people who have no problems doing those kinds of things. It’s difficult to ask for help when I need it. How can I ask for the help of someone who unlikely has the slightest understanding of the life I’ve lived? Being able to articulate myself and express myself effectively or with confidence took a long time because I didn't really know my own voice—I’d become a servant to everyone else in the world.

The long-term effects of poverty are devastating. You take longer to achieve life's expected outcomes (having access to higher education, a well-paid career path, buying a car, having a family, buying a house, and having the security, pride, and ego to strive toward more and better. In my case, two years ago, 2013 was the first time I lived in a house; and even so, it was rented. I still don't own my own home, and I'm turning 37 in a few months. I don't have children because I worry about my ability to afford having children when I already have to financially support my mother's separate household expenses in addition to my own, since she has no retirement savings—absolutely nothing but her social security of \$500 per month, which does not pay for anyone's living by any measure.

It’s only now that I am what most people would consider “successful.” I have no debt. I support myself, as well as my mother, as I have been since I was in high school. I went to college, got a degree in something that has absolutely nothing to do with my career. I luckily found a career path I was happy with. But I was living in poverty for the majority of my life, and had to take significant measures to break the cycle of poverty I was living in, like moving to Korea, a country where I knew no one and didn't speak the language of, to become an English teacher so I could pay off my credit card debt from my college years and make sure that the collection agency could get their money before returning to the US.

This is not about taking the right stand on an issue, but rather in standing in the right place—with those who are relegated to the margins of society—the impoverished. When will we ever hear from the legislature that they are concerned about those in poverty, rather than they are

concerned about the far fewer people who happen to own businesses and are not in poverty? For the sake of the thousands of children living in poverty in Oregon, who will NEVER have an opportunity to testify, who do not have a lobbyist, who do not even have a voice, please support a \$15 minimum wage and give them a voice. The impoverished outnumber all other groups who will speak for or against this measure. If that means anything, please support SB 610/HB 2009. Thank you.

Mimi Khalili