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Reconceptualizing Women's Work: A Focus on the Domestic and Eligibility Work of Women on Welfare

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The types of work performed by women receiving public assistance are examined. Research on women's work often neglects the labor of poor women, reinforcing the view that women receiving welfare do not work. This perspective is challenged with focus group and interview data from welfare recipients in New Orleans, Louisiana. We conclude that within the restrictions of public assistance, poor women are engaging in three types of work: domestic work for their families, economic work for cash—both legal and illegal work, and eligibility work. Eligibility work is defined as the labor necessary to obtain and maintain public assistance.

Introduction

In the last several years welfare has been a hot political topic. Currently under debate in Congress are reforms that appear largely punitive for poor women and their children. Currently, both House and Senate versions include replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and several other programs with less money in block grants given directly to the states, restricting participants to maximum time limits of five years, and eliminating additional support for children born to women already receiving welfare (Broder, March 29, 1995).

Critics argue that cutting funds and putting time limits on eligibility will have dire consequences. With a cap on the funds, states will be able to refuse assistance to needy families when the federal money runs out. Moreover, most proposals being considered seem to depend on optimistic assumptions about job

opportunities for participants when they are no longer eligible for welfare. Louisiana's senators supported the proposed Senate version of welfare reform, but nevertheless expressed concerns "that Louisiana won't have the resources to find jobs for those forced off the rolls" (Alpert, September 20, 1995: A-9).

The last welfare reform, the 1988 Family Support Act, initiated the current job training and educational programs for welfare recipients, but the bill contains many hidden and unsupported assumptions about women's ability to earn enough to support a family by themselves (Naples, 1991). This bill has produced mixed results. For example, from 1990 to 1994, over 11,000 participants completed the program in New Orleans, but as of early 1994 only 8.5 percent were employed and off AFDC, with another 4.5 percent in jobs and receiving reduced AFDC (Alpert, April 17, 1994: A8).

What is missing in nearly all of the current media discussions are the actual voices and perspectives of poor women who, at some time in their lives, rely on welfare. When the voices are, in fact, included in media accounts, familiar stereotypes are confirmed. For example, a woman without a high school diploma is quoted in a *U.S. News & World Report* cover story as eliminating some job possibilities because "I'm not really a morning person" ("Welfare: The Myth of Reform," January 16, 1995: 33).

A different picture is found in qualitative research that directly examines the lives of poor women on welfare (Edin, 1991; Jarrett, 1994; Popkin, 1990). For example, in contrast to the stereotype that welfare mothers avoid marriage, Jarrett (1994: p. 34) finds considerable support for and belief in marriage as the "cornerstone of conventional family life," and at the same time, a somewhat pessimistic recognition that the ideal represents an impossibility for them. As one respondent, talking about the possibility of marriage and a home of her own, said: "That's a little white girl's dream" (Jarrett, 1994: p. 37).

Nevertheless, the fact remains that nowhere in the United States does welfare assistance or the combination of welfare and food stamps raise a family's income level above the federally-defined poverty line, which was \$11,304 for a family of three—one adult and two children under 18—in 1992 (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1993: Table A). The median AFDC benefit across all

the states in 1993 for a one-parent family of three was \$367 per month, with an additional \$285 in food stamps (U. S. Ways and Means Committee, 1993: 657). On an annual basis, that amounts to \$7,824, less than 70 percent of the poverty line.

In this paper, we present the voices and perspectives of some of the women who rely on welfare. We recount the everyday lives of poor women to illustrate how much work is required to survive and to keep themselves and their children. We distinguish three separate areas of work from these conversations: domestic work, economic work, and eligibility work. Domestic work has been recognized and researched by many including feminists (e.g., Kemp, 1994; Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994; South and Spitze, 1994), although both the economic and domestic work of poor women has received little attention. But eligibility work, as we discuss below, is rarely a subject in empirical studies. The next section briefly reviews some of the relevant literature on the work of poor women.

Poor Women's Work

Domestic Work

Feminists have long argued that those tasks performed primarily by women in the home for no wages should be regarded as productive work. For example, Rowbotham (1989) marks the focus on domestic labor as beginning in the early 1970s with the demand for wages for housework. Many have examined productive work in significant detail (see Coverman and Sheley, 1986; Oakley, 1975; Rexroat and Shehan, 1987; Strasser, 1982), and there is a growing quantitative literature analyzing the domestic division of labor in dual-earner, married-couple households, as well as in noncouple households (i.e., divorced, widowed, or never-married) (see Brines, 1994; Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994; South and Spitze, 1994). Little has changed from the earlier studies on married couples as employed wives continue to perform over 33 hours of household tasks per week and husbands just over 18 (Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994: Table 2). Information about time in household tasks by poor and/or welfare mothers specifically is scarce.

Another important focus extends the conception of domestic labor. As Lorber (1994:174) argues, "the expansion of domestic work beyond housework and child care turns it into social reproduction." Thus the meaning is extended from the tasks of housework, such as child care, cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, yard and repair work, to include emotional work, social caring, and overall nurturing of all the family members. Mothering activities remain an important aspect of women's domestic work, and it has received considerable research attention (see Chodorow, 1978; Rich, 1976; Glenn *et. al.*, 1994). While the meaning of domestic labor continues to be debated, this brief review notes the absence of information about poor women's domestic work.

Economic Work

Economic work refers to work that is undertaken for economic gain, including legitimate work performed for wages in the formal labor market and informal 'off-the-books' work for cash or in-kind, bartered services. A third type of economic work is illegal work which is also performed 'off-the-books.' Researchers find that AFDC recipients frequently have legitimate labor market experience. A new study from the Institute for Women's Policy Research (Spalter-Roth *et. al.*, 1995), using a national longitudinal sample of single mothers who had used AFDC for at least two months out of a 24-month period, reports that 73.7 percent of these women also participated in the formal labor market during the sample period (23.4 percent were looking for work and 50.3 percent had paid jobs). Only 19.7 percent had no labor market time (including almost 6 percent of the total who were students) and the remaining 6.6 percent were disabled.

The major barriers to labor market jobs are a combination of low job skills among poor women that lead only to low-paying, dead-end jobs and their need for health care benefits and child care, which are typically unavailable to workers in low-paying, dead-end jobs (Kemp, 1994). Jarrett's (1994) research found welfare mothers had extensive experience in legitimate labor market jobs, but they could not survive on the low wages, could not manage long commutes from their neighborhoods, and could not overcome the uncompromising requirements of employers when they or their children were ill. One woman in her study

said: "It don't make sense to go to McDonald's to make \$3.35 an hour when you know you got to pay 4 dollars an hour to baby-sit and you got to have bus fare" (Jarrett, 1994: p. 40).

Edin (1991) represents a major exception to the scarcity of research on poor women's economic work. She conducted 50 intensive interviews with AFDC recipients in Chicago and constructed a budget of their income and expenses. She found that the AFDC grant and the dollar value of food stamps amounted to approximately 60 percent of their expenses per month. The shortfall of 40 percent (an average of approximately \$343 per month) came from earned and unearned sources. The earned sources (regular and underground economy jobs) averaged 44 percent of the shortfall, and unearned (money from friends, family, boyfriends, absent fathers, and others) represented 56 percent. Income from underground jobs averaged \$38 per month for the participants in this study, and for the subset (22 participants) living in subsidized housing, only \$14 per month came from 'off-the-books' work (Edin, 1991: Table 1).

Eligibility Work

The third category of work we distinguish is eligibility work. There is a considerable amount of work necessary for people to apply for, receive and continue to be eligible for government assistance. This includes applications for welfare, food stamps, social security, supplemental social insurance (SSI-for low-income elderly and/or disabled persons), disability, and educational assistance programs. This is the work required by public agencies so as to "translate between the entitlement [public agency] and the actual giving of nurture . . . the meeting of material needs" (Gordon, 1990: 13). These agencies depend on a woman, usually, to be:

available to make it possible for the aid to be delivered: to drive, to care, to be at home for visits, to come to the welfare offices (Gordon, 1990: 13).

Obtaining this assistance also requires applying, traveling, repeatedly documenting the extent of need, and waiting to receive the aid. Furthermore, in the absence of or in addition to public assistance, poor families often rely on contributions from churches,

food banks, the Salvation Army, and so forth. All of this is eligibility work that, for the most part, is women's work, whether performed by poor women needing public assistance or charity, or by mothers and daughters caring for disabled and/or elderly relatives.

In the descriptions that follow, our examinations of the day-to-day lives of poor women on welfare reveal that these women are agents in their own lives. First, they do domestic or social reproduction work in caring for their children and their homes. Second, they do economic work in attempting to get and sometimes obtaining waged employment and/or they do informal sector, cash-only jobs, including some that are illegal. And third, they do eligibility work in keeping the documents and receipts necessary to maintain their eligibility, in traveling to the welfare and other offices, and by participating in mandatory job-training and educational programs to which their welfare grants are tied.

Description of the Study

This study uses informant interviews and focus groups in order to describe the working lives of women on welfare. We conducted the study in Orleans parish and Jefferson parish, Louisiana, where the mandatory job and educational training program (JOBS) of the 1988 Family Support Act became part of the welfare program in 1990. Fifty percent of all the households in Orleans parish are headed by a single parent, the vast majority of whom are women (Warner, 1995, A-1).

The persons interviewed and the participants in the focus groups were women currently or previously on welfare. These subjects were selected to acquire a wide diversity of women on welfare. We worked with the local office of Human Resources to select some welfare recipients, and we met women at a local community agency that works as an advocate for low-income families. We also attended a non-residency support group for battered women, where most of the women in the group either were or had been on welfare. Finally, through a personal contact, we set up two focus groups with women receiving welfare and residing in a public housing complex. Jarrett (1993) discusses using personal contacts to recruit low-income respondents for focus groups and argues that impersonal strategies from people

outside the community are likely to be unsuccessful because of access problems and a lack of legitimacy.

Altogether 16 women were involved; nine of whom were African-American. Their ages ranged from five who were between 23 and 24, six who were between 28 and 40, and five who were between 40 and 55.

In general, the interview and focus group questions were open-ended and conversational; each interview lasted approximately two hours and the focus groups from two to three hours. A few sections of the interview schedule were more directive and involved specific areas of questioning. These methods allowed the study to concentrate on the interpretations the participants have of their lives and their understandings of the welfare system. Focus groups, especially, are a recommended method when there are social differences between the researchers and the target group. Language, lifestyles and educational differences are barriers to permitting authentic responses (Jarrett, 1993; Morgan and Krueger, 1993). Focus groups are non-threatening means to bridge such gaps and to provide access to the reality experienced by the target group. When respondents are discussing their everyday lives, a focus group is a useful way to have them elaborate and explain what is, for them, taken-for-granted. As Morgan and Krueger (1993:17) describe:

... participants will not be immediately able to express all their feelings or motivations on a topic. As they hear others talk, however, they can easily identify the degree to which what they are hearing fits their situation. By comparing and contrasting, they can become more explicit about their own views. In addition, as they do express their own feelings and experiences, they may find that answering questions from the moderator and other participants makes them aware of things that they had not thought about before.

While these interviews and focus groups are not intended to constitute a demographic or statistically-based sample of poor women, they do represent a variety of individuals receiving government assistance.

Findings

The findings are organized around the three themes of work we distinguished from the literature on women's work and

from listening to our participants describe their everyday lives. *Domestic work* includes child care, housework, maintenance of relationships, maintaining clothes, preparing meals, shopping, transportation to school, and other household chores.

The shortage of money and the necessity to budget entails a great deal of planning and careful shopping. For most of these women, checking and saving accounts are not part of their day-to-day lives, and their expenses increase because of the lack of banking services. For example, the women typically spent two dollars to cash their welfare checks. Without traditional banking services, of course, the cash has to be kept somewhere safe:

You have to put it in a drawer or put it under your mattress. [or] Stick it under a mattress or in a safe deposit box. That's the only way you can do it. God forbid somebody break in your home. God forbid you have a wild party and people know where your money is, because then your money gone.

Shopping is mainly limited not only to those purchases that can be made with food stamps, but also to those stores that are accessible. Few have access to a car in order to travel to suburban stores with greater selections. Others use public transportation, at least to get there:

I take a bus there and a taxi back. Those taxis cost you a quarter a bag. They charge you [in addition to the regular fare] a quarter a bag for each bag of groceries. Plus \$.50 a head in the cab.

The regulations of welfare and food stamps define how participants must manage and spend their money. Some of the women spoke about wanting to save money but said that the existence of a savings account might make them ineligible. Others pointed out that if they were away from home (shopping, at the welfare office, or anywhere), they could only purchase cold sandwiches (not hot food) with food stamps at a grocery delicatessen. But most frequently they mentioned that they cannot purchase disposable diapers with food stamps.

Being able to shop and provide for their children is very important to them. They report anxiety over how difficult it is to make sure their children have what they need and appear well cared for. As for themselves, they shop in second hand stores,

thrift shops and other similar locations. But as one said, "I have not shopped for myself in ages."

It is especially poignant to hear these women talk about how difficult it becomes at the beginning of the school year. Children need new clothes and shoes and school supplies. In addition, it is common for public schools in this area to ask parents to pay a one-time assessment (approximately \$20 per child) at the beginning of the year to purchase school room supplies. One woman described a time when her daughter could not go on a field trip because she did not have the \$2 fee for the trip. All holidays and birthdays are problematic, too.

Like most women with children, it is the work of mothering that defines their lives. They talk about the responsibility they feel towards their children as single parents:

Your child comes first. So you have to think about your child first . . . You have to get out there and get what you want for your child, because you don't want your child on government assistance.

Another woman, discussing how she manages to do everything and still be a good mom, said:

When you're not doing things like you have to do, like cook or whatever, you're with your child, giving him that extra time that you have to spare. Let them know that we're going to be together or hang or talk or whatever, after everything that I have to do is done . . . You spend that time with your kids.

Health care for their children is an important aspect of mothering. In Louisiana, access to Medicaid (medical care for low-income people) is tied to a person's welfare eligibility. Several of our participants consider their medical card the most valuable part of the welfare package, especially when attempting to leave welfare for paid employment. A similar expression is found by respondents in Jarrett (1994, p. 40):

One reason, seriously.. that I do not want (public aid) to take my check (is) because I need my medical card. They can take my money, but I need that medical card and I need those food stamps.

With a Medicaid card people may go to any participating doctor or hospital in the city for health care, but many in New

Orleans still seem to prefer Charity Hospital, a state-run hospital that was originally established by the Sisters of Charity and still provides care to anyone who needs it. More importantly for these women, however, the Charity Hospital staff treats them right even though there is considerable waiting involved.

. . . everybody likes to go to Charity because they have good doctors; they take good care of you. It may be a wait, but it's worth the wait. I feel like that. It's worth the wait.

Everyone that goes there is low income. They [the staff] know exactly what they're dealing with . . . [you're] around your people.

Poverty and the regulations of the welfare programs dominate their household existence, but it also dominates these women's economic work.

Economic work

Originally created for widows and orphans, welfare was designed to allow mothers the opportunity to raise their children without having to take paid employment (Pearce, 1990). While welfare policies now include incentives to work, full employment continues to make a person ineligible for most assistance. Whether employed part time or not at all, most women on welfare relate and the eligibility workers reluctantly admit that it is almost impossible to survive within the benefit levels of welfare. Poverty is still very much a condition of their lives.

Following an indirect method for non-threatening self-disclosure (see Zeller, 1993), we asked, in a general sense, what actions they see people taking and what work others might do in order to make ends meet. We distinguished three types of responses—legal work that is reported, legal work that is unreported (so-called 'off-the-books' work), and illegal work that is also unreported. Welfare regulations allow recipients to earn no more than \$50 within a month without a reduction in their welfare check.

One legitimate means of work is represented by various city or state funded jobs available to residents in the housing projects. Residents are paid for cutting the grass, doing bulk mailings, or participating in special grants. Often times this money is not counted in the \$50 minimum. The Summer Jobs Program, funded by the federal government, is one such program for teens.

People also find paid labor market jobs which the welfare office learns about either from the participants themselves or from the Louisiana Department of Labor Statistics. All of our participants had at some point in their lives held regular paid jobs that showed up in the statistics of the Department of Labor. The department reports to the welfare office are one of the major ways recipients are caught. Two women in our study mentioned that when they got a small, 25 cents per hour raise in a paid labor market job, their food stamps were cut. Several women in Edin's (1991) research engaged in full or part-time jobs with false social security numbers, so as to avoid being caught. Earning only \$5 or \$6 an hour, the women were unable to survive without their welfare grant, too. In order to maintain receipt of full benefits, one solution is to work jobs that are outside the official system—so called 'off-the-books' work.

The women told us about working for cash for individuals or for businesses. For many of these women, babysitting and house cleaning are frequent opportunities. Others engage in caring for elderly or sick persons, doing sewing, or fixing hair or nails. In some communities, cooking suppers from home for two or three dollars a plate is a familiar way to raise money for rent, a funeral, bail, or hiring a lawyer.

The 'off-the-books' work for businesses described in our research included working as janitors or doing cooking or cleaning in bars or restaurants. Participants in what is also referred to as the hidden economy frequently work hard, performing needed jobs "for a fraction of what a professional" or official worker would charge (Templin, April 4, 1995: A1). The Internal Revenue Service estimates an undercollection of \$114 billion in income taxes from legal but unreported work. "That would make the illicit underground economy worth some \$600 billion (equivalent to 10 percent of the Gross National Product)" (Schiff, 1992: 22).

One 'off-the-books' opportunity discussed in one of the housing project focus groups sounded almost too good to be true:

. . . that's a cruise boat . . . they pay you cash. You'll come home with \$7000 in your pocket. The cruise lasts, you'll be gone for six weeks and you're home for two weeks . . . that's money that don't be reported . . . you clean rooms every day. You have 19 rooms for

42 days . . . You can't spend it nowhere. You're coming home with that and then it's straight out cash.

The third type of economic work we distinguished includes ways to earn cash that are regarded as illegal, and outside the realm of legitimate work. This work is also part of the informal sector and 'off-the-books.' Every woman we talked to mentioned prostitution as an informal 'off-the-books' way to earn cash. Edin (1991) found women in her study earning approximately \$3 to \$5 an hour from illegal 'off-the-books' work, including prostitution, theft, and selling drugs. In our study, the respondents also talked about women who lived with men they did not necessarily like in order to acquire income. One described how her child's father usually provided the needed packs of disposable diapers for their baby, but "if me and her father get into a fuss, pamper money out the door."

Several women described having "special friends." One said you have to "try to meet as many 'friends' as you can." Others referred to women carhopping:

Or carhopping, people go carhopping. You only want men with something. He has to have a car . . . [the interviewer interrupted: "what is carhopping?"] Carhopping is from one car to . . . like you kept your eyes on people in the cars. You're watching every car that pass because if a shob [meaning nice, good] car passes with a shob dude in it . . .

It was also mentioned that women used their houses to let others sell drugs. And some sell drugs themselves or let their children sell drugs:

If you have no other means of survival and your son is out there selling drugs. You're looking at that money, you're saying "Lord, there's money; there's money. Lord, it's wrong, it's wrong. I need this, my child needs this. Lord, it's wrong, it's wrong. This [the money] outweighs all that is wrong . . . even though I think it's wrong . . . but that's life. That's what people's doing. You have to face reality. That's what's going on.

Selling food stamps remains an important source of cash. The going rate is fifty cents on the dollar, although some will give higher rates. The stamps are also bargained for rent or cash.

In Edin's (1991) category of unearned income, she included money from boyfriends and absent fathers. The mothers received money from live-in boyfriends who had jobs and from ones who "work the streets" (Edin, 1991: p. 466). Although most had furnished the requested information on the paternity of their children, they had neither court-ordered child support awards nor regular payments from the fathers. Nationally, it is estimated that of all women living with their own children with the father absent, only 58 percent have child support awards. Only 43 percent of them received the full amount—an average of \$2,995 per year per family in 1990—and 25 percent received nothing (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1991: p. 1).

The biggest resentment among our recipients was directed at the regulations where absent fathers pay support through the welfare office, and everything over the allowable \$50 per month cash income is kept by the welfare office.

As national statistics show, most women on welfare do economic sector work either legally or illegally (see Spalter-Roth *et al.*, 1995). The main reason they work, of course, is that they need the money; the reason they do not report it is fear of losing their food stamps, their medical cards, or their welfare grant.

The third type of work evident in these women's lives is the eligibility work they have to do to obtain and retain public assistance.

Eligibility work

Eligibility work is time-consuming and brings with it a complex set of thoughts and emotions. For these women, this work can be divided into gathering the documentation, preparing the 'story' they have to tell, actually going to the welfare office, and participating in the JOBS program. Moreover, in order to continue receiving assistance, a person has to re-qualify every six months for AFDC, Medicaid, and food stamps. In many ways, the process is like a personal IRS audit twice a year since bank books, child care records, birth certificates, social security cards, medical records, rent receipts, utility receipts, and so forth, must be presented for the re-evaluation. Every recipient we spoke to talked about how they organized this work. The first job is to gather and organize the necessary documents:

I keep it all in a folder that says "Welfare Files" "Important Files" "Do Not Destroy." I keep doctors slips. I keep everything from when she [her daughter] goes to the doctor. I keep all kinds of stuff.

Each woman who applies for welfare must spend time and energy preparing her story for the welfare office. One woman who works as an advocate for poor women teaches them how to apply for welfare. She stated:

Then we sit down and tell them about the questions that they're going to be asked—even though they're personal questions. We let them know the questions they ask—such as, when was the last time you saw the father steady, the last time when you had a sexual relationship, where did the relationship take place. So we sit down and we coach them and we let them know. And there's one thing that we use all the time: you're going to them for help. No matter how demeaning the questions are, you need the help. So we say, take a deep breath, go in and answer the questions as honestly as you can and get it over with. Once you leave if you need to scream or hit something, then do it after you leave.

Their relationship with the father of the child is an important part of the information the welfare office requires. The young mothers may not necessarily want to give the name of the father because he is already providing assistance. He, or someone in his family, may be contributing money for disposable diapers or school clothes. This subject is a constant source of tension for these women. The young men in this community are often unemployed themselves. If the welfare or child support offices locate them, they may resent the mothers and stop their contributions. Since the FSA went into effect, the women report that the questions about the fathers of their children have increased.

Another mother describes a trip to welfare office when she had to wait even though she had an appointment. Her experience reveals some of the tension and worry that the interview creates. She said:

You know, so we feel like we've been waiting all this time to go in here and then we've set up here and you know we've got everything together in our minds what we're going to say, you know? It takes a long time for them to call you. You kind of forget about it because you got to study what you're going to say and you've got

to remember. You've got to go back and say the same thing you said six months ago.

This woman also describes the work necessary just to make the trip to the office:

I need to find someone to watch my baby . . . then I ask, "Who can give me some bus fare to get there?" Or if I can get a ride . . . can they come get me, or if they can give me some bus fare to get home . . . And I asked my little sister's boyfriend five days ahead of time if he were willing to bring me . . . and I asked my momma for bus fare to get home.

The trip to the office is further related by a woman attending college through the JOBS program.

I get up at 5 or 6 in the morning. I study, go to school. I have to come way from school, I call and say, give me time to get there, I'm coming, but I'm on the bus. She gave me a 9 o'clock appointment, [but] . . . I couldn't come for 9 in the morning. I had to call her and say, I can't make it . . . So she had to reschedule. Then she scheduled me for 2 o'clock. It still was horrible . . . It's just hectic doing all that. You're always rushed. You're rushing. Then you want to make it there on time so you can leave there on time to get the kids for when they get out of school.

After they qualify, they wait for the AFDC check or the food stamps voucher that they exchange for their food stamp coupons. The mailman becomes the most important person in the neighborhood:

Well, the mailman pass at about 3:30. God forbid he come after 4, we'll be hungry for the weekend.

And then the food stamp office, where you get the food stamps, they close at 4. So you're like praying to the Lord. You're like meetin' the mailman half-way down the block just so you can get to your food stamps before the welfare office closes. So you're like "Please give me my food stamp card. I got 20 minutes to get there. So especially could you give me my card so I could leave."

Eligibility work becomes even more difficult when it is considered in conjunction with domestic and economic work. The women feel they cannot report the money they might get from their relatives; they cannot report the income from any informal

sector work; and, at the same time, they must tell a story to the welfare office that will certify the benefits they receive.

Since 1990, when the JOBS section of the 1988 FSA went into effect, welfare recipients' eligibility now requires them to participate in Project Independence. Initially, this project enrolled only women who volunteered to participate, and the number of volunteers exceeded the slots available in New Orleans. It is only recently that mandatory participation was enforced as slots became open in these courses and programs.

In Louisiana, the program has concentrated on education and training, rather than jobs. The program pays for the educational courses, training programs, child care, and transportation. The women on welfare reported both enthusiasm and cynicism for Project Independence. Some saw it as a real opportunity to get off welfare, and others saw it as just another requirement for them to meet in order to receive the welfare grant, food stamps, and medical benefits. One recipient stated:

It's not that we don't want to work. We need some jobs. If I show you the certificates I got from them sending me from one school to the other. I have certificates for food service. I have certificates in the work that I do here [office, clerical work], and working in . . . public relations. I have a certificate for tenant management . . . I have some certificates in child development, and I didn't have any job. What we need them to do is get us a job, train us for that job, and after the training is over, then put us in that job.

A practical problem they encounter is with transportation. They have to take their child to the day care provider, and then go to the training or education office. Often this involves two or three different bus trips. Further, the day care providers were sometimes slow with the necessary paper work, and the women have had to "pay weekly for the child care, and then wait a month for their money."

Although some of the women we talked to felt that the training was beneficial, they are aware that jobs with health care benefits are scarce. What seems apparent from their reports is that FSA gives women on welfare one more thing that they have to do for their assistance. They receive no other support for this training and no extra grant money. Further, if they do not participate

consistently after they are signed up for this program and cannot provide a sufficient excuse, their benefits can be cut. Too many absences without documented excuses (such as from a doctor) can result in a loss of benefits for three months. One woman who had participated said:

I went to training (PI) for child care and they promised me a job in 1991. And it is now 1995 and here I sit. And two weeks ago, they sent me a letter telling me I have to go back to Project Independence. And one lady asked me what I've been doing in my spare time. I said, babysitting my grandchild. Now I have to go to school.

Another woman talked about the documentation needed when she misses a class in her required job training and education program:

You know, if your child is sick then some of them just provide doctor slips. Say for instance, I have to take my baby to the doctor, then I would ask the doctor to give me a doctor slip . . . If it's just somebody in your family, you know, if your mom's still living or whatever, somebody says well my mom is sick and I need to be home with her . . . But you can't keep using the same excuse over and over . . . you've got to keep ahead of them.

From these women's reports, it is evident that they expend a considerable amount of time and energy in 'working' for their public assistance—not only obtaining and maintaining their eligibility, but also participating in the educational and job training programs.

Summary and Policy Implications

It is apparent that these women work and have acquired crucial survival skills from their welfare experience. They participate in domestic work, economic work, and eligibility work. They spend time with their children; they spend time looking for and working in paid legal and illegal jobs; and they spend time qualifying for their benefits. These are not women who spend their days "on the stoop," doing nothing. What time they are spending "on the stoop" is likely time waiting for the mailman so they can get their food stamp vouchers.

The cultural stereotypes of welfare recipients as lazy and the regulations of welfare dominate the everyday lives of poor

women in three major ways. Their day-to-day activities are shaped; their behavior is proscribed; and they continually have to hide their feelings and preferences.

Their activities are shaped because they have the medical card and food stamps. Even though they can use these at almost any health clinic, hospital or store, the women describe going to the public charity hospital where "they take good care of you . . . [you're] around your people." They describe going to grocery stores where people are 'like them' and of living in neighborhoods where people are the same. Further, what they can buy and cannot buy with food stamps is carefully regulated—no paper products, no disposable diapers, no 'hot' sandwiches.

Their behavior is proscribed in that they have to ask and ask politely in almost all situations in their lives. Because welfare is seen as charity rather than as a public resource, they must ask for the welfare they receive. They are always asking for help from their neighbors, friends, and family members. The dependency that conservatives deride as a major impairment from welfare may be alternatively described as a consequence of the continual requirement of always having to ask. They are rarely given opportunities in their lives to make declarative statements or demands about their wants or needs.

The third way the stereotypes and regulations dominate their lives is in the need to hide. They have to get the story straight that they tell the welfare office, and yet, they attempt to match their lives to the regulations. They have to hide any extra money they acquire; they have to hide how they 'earned' that money; and in order not to be seen as 'bad mothers', they have to hide the fact that sometimes they cannot provide what their children need. This hiding causes them worry and upset, and they have to hide that, too.

It is not surprising then that popular press images of poor women's lives and propositions for putting welfare mothers off the welfare rolls do not mention that poor women are already working. Researchers and scholars implicitly support these criticisms when they, too, fail to consider how analyses of all women's work might be altered by the inclusion of the working lives of poor women. Consequently, many of the policies are written as though anyone can find a job who wants one. The new proposals

being considered limit participation to a maximum of two years, which will force women into a job market often without sufficient education and training for decent jobs. Many policies are written as though every job will pay sufficiently to cover a family's expenses; but it is not possible to combine assistance with a low-paying job except for a very short time. Many policies are written as though every job has health care benefits; but participants lose their Medicaid coverage after six months of leaving welfare.

Policies for poor women might be better designed if they were built on the strengths of these women, rather than on their perceived deficiencies. Built, for example, on the strength of their extended kin network, on their ability to manage few resources, and on their ability to keep their children safe in dangerous neighborhoods. Future research could further document the skills of poor women, ones that may translate to other situations or communities. Additional research might illustrate the hidden injuries of current welfare rhetoric and policies. The worry, the lies, and the necessity to have to 'make do', to hide, and still being unsuccessful in spite of their best efforts. Together these create the circumstances within which poor women live their everyday lives.

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