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Coming Full Circle: Poverty and Public  
Assistance in the United States:  
Colonial Days to 2004

By  
Danielle Jeanne Bird

B.A. University of Montana, 2002

\*\*\*\*\*

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

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Approved by:

  
Chairperson

  
Dean, Graduate School

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Date

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## Introduction

America is the land of the middle class. Socio-economic groups are described as upper, middle or lower middle class. Very little is said about poverty or the poorest class in America unless it is to condemn the recipients of public assistance. The lowest class in America centers on “welfare moms” or as Jim Wallis, reporter for the Washington Post terms it, “Burger King Moms.” The Burger King Mom “is part of the low-income demographic most unrepresented in U.S. politics.”<sup>1</sup> Wallis explains that the economic group to which “Burger King Mom” belongs is effectively disenfranchised because “many low income people have a hard time connecting to voting; it’s too complicated, there are too many other things to worry about, and there is too little reason for confidence that the outcome will make much difference for them.”<sup>2</sup> For Wallis, the conclusions regarding the apathy of low-income voters ring true when examining the trends of poverty. Little is said regarding the plight of the poor on campaign trails. Politicians rarely mention the pressing issues of welfare recipients. However, welfare and poverty are important issues, particularly for women.

In 1972, welfare activist Johnnie Tillmon wrote, “welfare is like a traffic accident. It can happen to anybody, but especially it happens to women.”<sup>3</sup> Poverty happens to women, and welfare affects women’s lives. Any paper on the subject of poverty and public assistance in America will be a paper on women in America. Poverty and public assistance are gendered topics, as recent historical scholarship illustrates. While the many books recently written on poverty in

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Wallis, “In Defense of ‘Burger King Mom’” in Missoulian, June 7, 2004, section B.

<sup>2</sup> Wallis.

<sup>3</sup> Johnnie Tillmon, “Welfare is a Women’s Issue,” MS. Magazine, spring 1972, 111-116.

American history show that poverty crosses many demographics such as age, race, ethnicity and class, most focus on women as a group intensely impacted by economic situations beyond their control. Issues relating to poverty affect women of all classes: both the poor women in need of assistance and the middle class women who sought to alleviate their difficulties. Poverty and public assistance are women's issues and have been throughout American history.

While poverty and public assistance are primarily women's issues, they are also connected to discussions of race and age. Johnnie Tillmon illustrated this when she stated: "I'm a woman. I'm a black woman. I'm a poor woman. I'm a fat woman. I'm a middle-aged woman. And I'm on welfare. In this country, if you're any of those things – poor, black, fat, female, middle-aged, on welfare – you count less as a human being. If you're *all* those things, you don't count at all."<sup>4</sup> Tillmon's statement reflects her vision of poor minority women in America. According to Tillmon, if you are poor or on welfare, you do not count to politicians. If you are a person of color, you are ignored. If you are middle-aged, you are not part of the voting demographics politicians care about. All these demographics – age, color, socio-economic status, and gender - are important factors in the development of poverty programs. Historical scholarship illustrates that membership in one of these groups makes one insignificant, membership in all these groups makes one invisible. The poor, female, and minority members of society are invisible in most historical studies as well as in modern times. They are the unpopular, the invisible, the statistics.

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<sup>4</sup> Tillmon.



Historian Gary B. Nash stated, “Poverty has not been a popular word in this country.”<sup>5</sup> The concept of poverty is distasteful to a populace raised on the ideology of equality. Everyone is middle class; there is no real inequality in America, according to popular historical accounts. This is explained by historian Billy G. Smith: “Historians, in agreement with Adam Smith, have embraced the shibboleth that because the New World contained a great deal of available land [...] and relatively few laborers, the law of supply and demand dictated that most early American working people should have enjoyed high wages and a decent material standard of life.”<sup>6</sup> Smith further explains: “The early Americans who expressed fears about poverty, both for their country and for themselves, have been largely ignored by scholars.”<sup>7</sup>

The history of early America focuses on the glory of the American colonies. As historian Gary B. Nash explains: “Every society needs its myths, and the great myth of early American history is that scarce labor in a land rich environment eliminated poverty.”<sup>8</sup> America’s history from the first days of colonization describes a society of equality. Historian Raymond Mohl explains; “Colonial America often has been described as a land of opportunity, an open and mobile society comprised largely of the ‘middling sort’ and devoid of extremes of poverty and wealth [...] the colonies had no beggars, no poor, not even a genuine

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<sup>5</sup> Gary B. Nash, “Poverty and Politics in Early American History,” in *Down and Out in Early America*, editor Billy G. Smith, (University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Billy G. Smith, “The Best Poor Man’s Country”? Introduction, in Billy G. Smith ed. *Down and Out in Early America*, (University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania University Press, 2004), xii.

<sup>7</sup> Billy G. Smith, “The Best Poor Man’s Country”? in Smith, xvi.

<sup>8</sup> Gary B. Nash, “Poverty and Politics in Early American History,” in *Down and Out in Early America*, editor Billy G. Smith, (University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 1

lower class.”<sup>9</sup> With this view of colonial America, it is assumed that poverty and its associated ills are a modern phenomenon. However, poverty has been a problem in America from colonial days forward.

Officials in early America sought a permanent solution to the problems associated with poverty. As historical research illustrates, they failed. Workhouses were stringent and punitive, designed to keep poor people from entering them. Poor houses were purposefully set up as unpleasant living quarters to keep people out, and rules were stringent enough that once people entered, they found it hard to leave. However, people not entering the workhouses or not asking for assistance did not mean that poverty did not exist; it merely meant that humiliation was successful in preventing poor people from seeking aid.

During the nineteenth century, the rise of maternalism brought new efforts to aid the poor and seek an end to the problems of poverty. Private charities, homes for unwed mothers and other organizations sought to relieve women in poverty while influencing their lives. Women’s groups worked to assist the poor in Victorian America, yet they found no lasting solution to poverty. Private charities and women’s organizations could not eliminate the problem of poverty; it would take a national federal effort to address the problem.

The Great Depression and the endless efforts of women’s campaigning and organizations brought about the New Deal programs. The New Deal created a foundation for a national welfare system, however imperfect. New Deal programs did not completely solve the problems of poverty. Race and moralism

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond A. Mohl, “Poverty in Colonial New York City,” in *Urban America in Historical Perspective*, Eds. Raymond A. Mohl and Neil Betten, (New York, Weybright and Talley, 1970) 65.

played a role in the development of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) as well as other programs designed to assist the poor. Black people were not eligible for assistance under New Deal programs. Thus, these programs were incomplete and unequal.

Beginning in the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement brought attention to the racist policies of southern states. Blacks sought equality on many levels, including housing and access to government social services. As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, laws that prevented blacks from accessing social welfare services began to change. The federal government issued new rules and regulations for welfare and states began to adopt policies that reversed their previous exclusionary tactics. The new policies of the federal government equalized benefits and increased access. The 1960s also brought to life the women's movement and the National Welfare Rights Organization, which sought to improve the plight of welfare moms. The significance of the NWRO was evident in its advocacy for women of all races and its fight against discriminatory policies in the welfare organization. Together, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement advanced the welfare program and temporarily equalized benefits.

The advances of the 1960s changed policies to allow blacks access to welfare benefits. Blacks were more likely to be and remain poor than their white counterparts. Additionally, black teenagers who became pregnant kept their babies more than white teenagers did. The sheer numbers of blacks and other

minorities who needed assistance and were able to access benefits due to the Civil Rights and Women's Movements increased the welfare rolls.

The expansion of the welfare system led to a re-evaluation of public assistance. As more minorities, especially black women, accessed the public assistance programs, welfare came to be regarded as a program for blacks. At the same time, public opinion turned against welfare, and many politicians sought ways to reduce funding and cut off benefits. By the 1970s, the enlarged welfare rolls became a target for attacks on the system. Public opinion reflected the middle class's growing awareness of the welfare system and the prevailing view that it was increasing middle-class Americans' tax burden. The visibility of the poor and the welfare system led to the belief, promoted by conservative politicians, that public assistance programs did not work. This impression was influenced by the welfare mothers who spoke out about the system. The media played a crucial role in the developing idea that the welfare system was almost entirely dominated by blacks who chose to live off the hardworking white middle class. As governor of California, Ronald Reagan brought to life the myth of the "welfare queen" who was living rich from the public system while the middle class had to struggle under heavy tax burdens to support her. When Reagan became president in 1980, many Americans shared his belief on the problems of the welfare system.

Ronald Reagan, an anti-welfare president, ushered in an era of punitive welfare measures. He pushed through his Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, which changed the system for determining eligibility for welfare benefits.

Reagan's programs made it more difficult to receive assistance. The primary motive of Reagan's anti-welfare legislation was his belief that welfare undermined family values, in which "family" is defined as a marriage between a man and woman with children. Single parents and same sex relationships failed to meet this narrow definition of family. As a result of Reagan's efforts, the 1980s saw an increase in work requirements for women on welfare as well as a reduction of benefits for women who had another child while receiving assistance. The passage of the 1988 Family Support Plan (FSP) increased the demands upon welfare mothers by allowing states to inflict stricter work requirements. The FSP also allowed states greater freedom to restrict some benefits, such as childcare.

In the wake of Reagan's presidency, politicians continued to portray welfare as a corrupt system in need of major reform instead of a safety net in need of repair and maintenance. The FSP did not reduce welfare rolls; rather the weak economy of the late 1980s caused the rolls and poverty to continue rising. Attention to the problems associated with welfare, including increased rolls and the perceived detrimental effects of welfare upon the family and work ethic, continued to increase during the 1980s.

Politicians' drive for welfare reform culminated in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), which drastically reduced access to welfare benefits. The new regulations decreased funding and set strict lifelong time limits for receipt of benefits. PRWORA forced work requirements on recipients while reducing assistance. New regulations also include stricter eligibility requirements and less funding for

childcare. The new rules demand compliance to unreasonable schedules and promote marriage as a means of leaving the welfare system.<sup>10</sup> PRWORA's new regulations are intended to reduce dependency on welfare; however, they create more difficulties for the poor. Difficulties encountered under PRWORA include increased paperwork, more caseworkers, and forced work requirements.<sup>11</sup> In contemporary America, single mothers, particularly minorities, are less likely to receive assistance, yet more likely to be impoverished.

Poverty is an enduring problem in the United States. Billy G. Smith explains, "Inequality in the distribution of wealth in the United States has increased during the past two decades at a rate previously unknown in the nation's history."<sup>12</sup> The vast disparity of classes in the United States is increasing at alarming rates while the safety net for the people who fall behind is disappearing. People leave the welfare rolls, but seldom are they achieving any form of economic security; rather, they are falling further behind in the economic gap. "In its level of inequality, the United States has grown more similar to preindustrial nations than to the industrial and postindustrial world."<sup>13</sup>

The changes to the welfare system under the PRWORA victimize the poor, particularly single mothers and minorities. The trends of welfare reform reverse the entitlement programs established during the New Deal. Furthermore, the advances to welfare during the Civil Rights Movement that equalized the system have evaporated. Welfare reform has created a new inequality in the

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, "Preface," in *Lost Ground: Welfare Reform, Poverty and Beyond*, edited by Randy Albeda and Ann Withorn, p.viii.

<sup>11</sup> Danielle J. Bird, Interview with "Claire" and "Jane."

<sup>12</sup> Bill G. Smith, "The Best Poor Man's Country," in Smith, xii.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, "The Best Poor Man's Country," xii.

welfare state. The new welfare rules and regulations violate the civil rights of recipients.

This study is an overview of welfare programs from colonial days through 2003. By providing an overarching view of public assistance programs, this paper will illustrate trends in welfare programs. Racism, defined in this study as discrimination against people of color, is one trend that this paper highlights. This study also examines sexism in welfare programs. For the purpose of this study, sexism is defined as intentional inequality based upon gender. Classism is another trend that is highlighted in this study of welfare programs. For the purpose of this paper, classism is defined as conflict and discrimination based upon socio-economic status and subsequent culture differences between the poor and the middle and upper classes. This study examines the role of these types of discrimination in poverty programs.

Poor assistance originated in colonial times with workhouses and punitive measures to punish the poor. The course of welfare's evolution includes the private charities and women's organizations of the nineteenth century. The women who established private charities for poor relief contributed to the development of federal programs and the rise of the welfare state. These women also introduced morals testing to assistance programs; morals testing would continue to be an aspect of welfare programs. Another contribution of nineteenth century, charity women were the development of ideals for proper womanhood and discrimination based upon race and class. Ideals of proper womanhood and

assistance based on race and class would continue to be embedded in federal welfare programs and policies.

The rise of the welfare state under the New Deal was incomplete, excluding people based upon color. Individual states used the standards that maternalist reformers had used. States maintained ideals and standards that excluded minorities, particularly black, unwed women. The Civil Rights Act corrected many racial injustices in the United States, including inequalities in the welfare system. The corrections the Civil Rights Act made to the welfare system were short lived. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 reversed the advances made in social welfare programs in the 1960s. This paper will illustrate how the United States has returned to a system of punitive measures designed to hurt the poor.

Poor relief systems in the United States began as small town measures designed to punish those in need of assistance. The poor also relied heavily upon private charities, as government measures were either non-existent or inadequate. The welfare system grew from private charities that excluded many of the neediest, into a government system designed to aid all the country's poor. However, PRWORA has returned the United States to an inadequate system that punishes the neediest Americans and turns assistance over to private organizations. This new legislation begs the question: do the poor have rights? The answer, apparently, is no. Welfare in the United States has come full circle- from a punitive and exclusionary program to a full service government system and once again to a punitive and exclusionary program. This paper will examine



the path of public assistance in the United States and explain the ways in which it evolved and then began to be dismantled.

Chapter One of this study, “Poverty and Public Assistance Before the Rise of the Welfare State,” examines the poor relief programs that existed in America before the advent of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) in the New Deal assistance programs. Gender played an important role in early relief systems. Colonial poor relief was an important part of the patriarchal society. Widows had no choice and had to rely on town elders for their survival. Women who did not adhere to the patriarchal social order were ineligible for relief in their home and were sent to asylums. Colonial American poor relief systems enforced the strict gender roles of the patriarchal society.

Chapter One also examines the development of nineteenth century private assistance programs. The public assistance programs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were gendered: women administered the programs and women received the assistance. Private charities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century used ideals of womanhood for administering relief. The women who worked in the charities adhered to the ideals of the “Cult of True Womanhood” and “Republican Motherhood” and expected their charges to adhere to these virtues as well. The ideologies of womanhood created a system of relief that was gendered, racist, and classist. Women who received aid were expected to adhere to the standards of white, middle class women. Thus, many women – single mothers and racial minorities – were excluded.

Chapter Two of this study, “Building and Expanding the Welfare State – 1935 to 1965,” provides an account of the establishment of the modern welfare

system. The New Deal programs, instituted by Franklin D. Roosevelt, established the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program, which is the foundation of the modern welfare system. However, African Americans were left out of the New Deal programs. People of color were sacrificed for the sake of political expediency. This chapter also explores the rise of the Civil Rights movement and the importance of welfare and economic justice for African Americans. Racism was embedded in governmental welfare programs from their inception. As this chapter will illustrate, the expansion of the welfare system to include non-whites caused repercussions that last through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapter Three, “Government and Grassroots Efforts to Reform Welfare: 1965 to 1975,” highlights the ways in which different groups tried to change the public assistance program. The years, 1965 to 1975, were a time of challenges to the government’s welfare regulations that were exclusionary on the basis of morality. Morals clauses, introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, became a means of blocking access from non-whites to the welfare system in the twentieth century. During this decade, welfare rights activists challenged unfair regulations in the court system and won some important victories for recipients. This chapter is important in understanding the evolving welfare system. Recipients made themselves heard and changed the welfare system to create a more inclusive program. Activism by recipients challenged sexist and racist aspects of welfare. Their activism also prevented the government from making any meaningful changes to the program. Welfare activism during this decade is significant: many of the recipients who spoke out against abuses were African American women.

These women of color challenged the racist status quo of governmental programs. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding public perceptions of welfare as a program for blacks and segues into Chapter Four, which highlights governmental actions of reform after welfare rights groups had lost their power.

Chapter Four, “Attacking the System: Backlash Against Welfare, 1975-1995,” examines politicians’ attacks on the welfare system. By 1975, welfare rights groups had lost their power, and the federal government could act with impunity in regards to welfare. During these years, politicians such as Ronald Reagan used public perceptions of welfare as a program for blacks as a means of gaining support for punitive changes to the system. The myth of the “Welfare Queen” developed during this time. The “Welfare Queen” was pictured in news stories as an African American woman who cheated welfare. During this twenty-year period, politicians and welfare opponents used the media to negatively portray welfare recipients and endorse cuts to social spending. Attacks on the welfare system highlight the racist aspects of the program as backlash grew out of the expansion of welfare to include people of color. Sexism also played an important part in attacks against the welfare system as politicians railed against single motherhood. Male politicians attempted to enforce a patriarchal order on society and called for a return to the “traditional” family. These two decades also highlight classism in welfare. Politicians repeatedly criticized welfare mothers who were living off the hard work of the middle-class. Chapter Four provides an important understanding of the twenty-year period leading to the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of

1996. It illustrates the classism, racism, and sexism that provided the impetus to the major reform of welfare.

This study concludes with Chapter Five, “Violating the Rights of the Poor, Welfare Reform, Activism and Reaction – 1996 to 2004.” This chapter explores the buildup to PRWORA in 1996 and how politicians used public perceptions of welfare recipients to pass this legislation. Chapter Five also explores reaction to PRWORA, including renewed welfare activism. Women’s scholars, feminist organizations, and academic organizations participated in the debate over welfare reform. After 1996, welfare recipients joined the groups criticizing PRWORA. This chapter illustrates the ways in which PRWORA punishes the poor and violates basic rights of choice. The passage of welfare reform in 1996 returns the public assistance system to a program that enforces a patriarchal view of society by encouraging marriage and teaching abstinence only sex-education. Government officials also encouraged private churches and charities to take over aspects of assistance. Thus, welfare has come full circle by forcing people to rely on private charities for their basic survival. Welfare reform enforced the racism, classism, and sexism that had become embedded in assistance programs by removing choice from women, particularly poor women and minorities.

This study relies on secondary sources from scholars of poverty and women’s historians. Conclusions from the secondary sources are used to illustrate important aspects of welfare programs. The secondary sources used in this study combine to provide a complete picture of welfare policies and interpretations.

Several authors have written on the subject of welfare as well as women's history. Their work helps to clarify welfare policies as they have evolved over time.

Linda Gordon, the Florence Kelley Professor of American History at the University of Washington and a member of the Institute for Research and Poverty, has long been an advocate for women and a scholar of poverty and welfare. Her book, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (1994), examines the history of single mothers in the welfare system and their contribution to the development of social welfare policy. *Women, the State and Welfare* (1990), an edited anthology of essays on women and poverty, provides insight into topics such as gender in welfare policy, race, family violence, and the War on Poverty. *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (1988) examines the role of domestic violence in female poverty and social welfare policy.

Mimi Abramovitz, Professor of Social Policy at Hunter College in New York City, provides two important books to the study of welfare. Her book, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* (1988), provides a comprehensive look at the development of welfare policies from colonial times through the 1980s. *Under Attack and Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States* (1996), provides a look at current policy trends in welfare stemming from the 1990s and the impact of welfare reform on the women who receive assistance. Abramovitz also examines the ways in which women are fighting the cuts the government is making to welfare.

Rickie Solinger, an independent scholar and founding member of Women United for Justice, Community and Family wrote two important books in the study of welfare and social policies. The first, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade* (1992), explores the challenges to pregnant teens, black and white, in the years 1945 to 1965. Solinger's second book, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (2001), examines abortion politics and the blame placed on white and black single mothers for the welfare "problem." Solinger's works demonstrate that welfare policies are shaped by women's desire to control their own lives and sexuality.

Jill Quadagno, Professor of Sociology at Florida State University has contributed an extensively researched book to the study of social welfare policy in the United States. Her book, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (1994), examines the connections between racism and the failures of social welfare policies. Additionally, Quadagno investigates the connections between the Civil Rights Movement and changing welfare policies in the 1950s and 1960s.

Two anthologies explore the recent issues and trends in welfare policies with their focus on PRWORA and welfare since 1996. The first, *Lost Ground: Welfare Reform, Poverty, and Beyond* (2002), is edited by two professors from the University of Massachusetts at Boston. Randy Albelda teaches economics; Ann Withorn teaches social policy. *Lost Ground* explores the issues surrounding welfare reform and its impact on poverty and single mothers. Ann Withorn also

co-edited the second anthology, *For Crying Out Loud: Women's Poverty in the United States* (1996), with former welfare recipient and current welfare activist Diane Dujon. *For Crying Out Loud* contains essays on topics such as the view of poor women created by the media and how the economy creates inequality as well as personal accounts of women on welfare.

Primary documentation, in this study, helps to clarify conclusions drawn from the secondary literature. Primary documents also provide anecdotal evidence in discussions of welfare policies and their effects on recipients. Primary documentation includes presidential statements from Franklin Roosevelt through Bill Clinton. Also included in the primary documents are the legislative acts that affect welfare, including bills from the New Deal, the Civil Rights Act, and welfare reform. Many of these documents are found in the book *Welfare: A Documentary History of U.S. Policy and Politics* (2004), compiled and edited by Rickie Solinger and Gwendolyn Mink. This book contains documents regarding welfare policies from 1900 through 2002. Mink and Solinger's book also contains records from public hearings on welfare. Also included in the primary documents are current newspaper and magazine articles. Papers from welfare advocacy groups illustrate the ways in which women are attempting to take back their lives and fight against the new stringent policies. Another important source for this study is interviews conducted with three women who currently receive public assistance. Included in this paper are the interviews from one woman who had recently begun receiving assistance for the first time and two women who had experience with the welfare system before and after PRWORA regulations. The

interviewees were asked about their experiences with the welfare system and what the new regulations meant for them and their families. Their personal experiences help to illustrate the manner in which welfare has become punitive. These primary sources, combined with secondary documentation, provide a complete picture of the evolution of welfare in the United States. Welfare programs have evolved from programs that punished the poor through private charities that based assistance on sexist, racist, and classist ideals, to federal programs that reinforced racism and sexism to the current system that punishes the poor, much as the colonial poorhouses did.

The welfare state developed and evolved over many decades. The programs established during the New Deal grew out of the maternalistic programs of the nineteenth century, which in turn replaced the poorhouses of the colonial era. The New Deal programs expanded under the Civil Rights Act to include blacks. The CRA made discrimination based on race and gender illegal and allowed for the expansion of welfare programs. This expansion inspired attacks against the system, and welfare reform became a constant rallying cry in political races during the 1970s and 1980s. The passage of PRWORA in 1996 was the culmination of years of attempts at welfare reform. The reform of welfare in 1996 discriminates based on race, gender, and class by robbing poor, minority women of the basic right of choice in their lives. The American welfare system has returned to a stingy, punitive system that expects adherence to a narrow definition of family. Welfare reform in 1996 brought the American public assistance program full circle.



## **Chapter One – Poverty and Public Assistance Before the Rise of the Welfare State**

### **Introduction**

Poverty has been a problem in the United States from the earliest days of colonization. Solutions to poverty were sought but never successful in ending the problem. Measures to alleviate poverty or to fix the problem permanently failed. They often failed due to embedded discriminations in the systems that leaders developed. During colonial days, church and town leaders sought ways to assist the poor that relied on the patriarchal society. Their measures were sexist as women had little or no choice but to rely on men for their survival. Failure on the part of a woman to adhere to the patriarchal norms of society made her undeserving of assistance. Early attempts to “fix” the problems of poverty also contained racist and classist overtones. Blacks were outside of the societal economy due to slavery and its embedded prejudices. Class also played an important role in discrimination in assistance programs, as the poor were often criticized for failing to meet the standards and virtues of the higher classes. Public assistance contained exhibited prejudices from the very beginning.

In colonial America, assistance programs were administered by town and church elders: however, in the early nineteenth and twentieth century social ills were the province of women. Before the rise of the welfare state, assistance programs were administered by white, middle class women. These women made social problems their calling through the nineteenth century ideals of “True Womanhood” and “Republican Motherhood.” These ideals of womanhood allowed middle class reformers to work towards bettering society. The secondary

literature on poverty before the rise of the welfare state focuses on women's roles in organizations that provided assistance. Four main themes emerge in the secondary literature: the maternalist aspects of reformers and welfare policies, the moralistic views of poor women, racial and ethnic bias, and the professionalization of social work. Very different systems of poor assistance emerged during colonial times and the nineteenth century. One was under the direction of men and the other women. However, both systems contained embedded discriminations based on sex, race and class.

### **Poor Assistance in Colonial America**

Poverty was present in early America, and town leaders attempted to correct the problem and to assist the poor. The first responses for dealing with the problems of the poor followed the examples of Elizabethan poor laws.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabethan poor laws made local townships responsible for the welfare of their citizens, meaning they carried the financial burden for the poor living within their boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Local responsibility created difficulties for cities and towns, as large quantities of towns' budgets were devoted to caring for the poor. In order to ensure the burden to the town did not increase, leaders enacted settlement laws to prevent transients from moving in and receiving aid. Mimi Abramovitz explains: "Transients in search of work, sea borne paupers, refugees from frontier wars, immigrants from abroad, and other 'strangers' might become a burden on the

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Mohl, "Poverty in Colonial New York City," in *Urban America in Historical Perspective*, edited by Raymond Mohl and Neil Betten, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Mohl, "Poverty in Colonial New York City," p. 66-67.

town.”<sup>3</sup> Settlement laws established rules of residency and allowed for “the removal of undesirable persons.”<sup>4</sup>

The strict patriarchal society in colonial America required adherence to the family unit. The patriarchal order, based upon the model of the Puritan Church, established the hierarchy of society. God was a man; men ran the town and their families. This patriarchal order was a model for the family as well as society and was extremely important in colonial towns. Poor laws “operated to uphold the family governance and proper family life.”<sup>5</sup> To maintain the patriarchal order, town officials required all strangers to submit for inspection and prove residency. “Persons with skills or resources were welcome to apply for residence.”<sup>6</sup> The likely candidates for residency were families or single men with skills. Single women found establishing residency more difficult. “Towns which encouraged the entry of able bodied persons and proper family units discouraged the settlement of husbandless women.”<sup>7</sup> Widows and orphans, while lacking a male breadwinner, still existed within the traditional family framework. Illegitimate pregnancy, divorce, and desertion all fell outside the norms of familial structure. Families who fit the patriarchal order were welcomed if they had resources: single women were not. Pregnant women were especially discouraged from establishing residency in order to prevent the birth of a child for whom the town would be obligated to care.

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<sup>3</sup> Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present*, (Boston, MA, South End Press 1988), 79.

<sup>4</sup> Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, “A Right to Childhood”: *The U.S. Children’s Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46*. (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 81.

Various forms of assistance were available once a town established its obligation to a poor resident. Families, of course, bore the first responsibility for poor relatives. Lacking family or financial ability to care for oneself meant eligibility for the first primary form of poor assistance, outdoor relief. Outdoor relief was assistance administered outside of poorhouses. “Outdoor relief went primarily to deserving paupers whom officials preferred to aid ‘in so private a manner that it is seldom known to any neighbors’”<sup>8</sup> Recipients of outdoor relief were the “deserving poor,” generally women who lived within the parameters of the patriarchal society and were without male support involuntarily. They were widows or wives of men who were temporarily unable to work.<sup>9</sup> Women deemed “deserving” received such necessities as firewood, food, clothing, and occasionally money.

Outdoor relief was the favored form of assistance in colonial America, as it carried the least amount of degradation and humiliation; it also offered the least amount of control over recipients. However, outdoor relief was not available to many. Indoor relief was often the form of assistance most available to the poor. Indoor relief involved living in the workhouse. Men, children, and women who lived outside the patriarchal norm of society were deemed “undeserving” of outdoor relief and were relegated to the workhouse, where they were required to perform manual labor in exchange for assistance. The poorhouses and workhouses were punitive methods of giving assistance; many women who entered were separated from their children and forced to work, “making it

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<sup>8</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 84.

impossible for them to pursue the socially valued roles of mother and homemaker.”<sup>10</sup> Poorhouses offered women no opportunity to redeem themselves, find a socially acceptable role, and become a functioning member of a patriarchal household.

The poorhouse, ideally meant “to provide for the comfortable maintenance of such paupers are unable to gain subsistence by labor,” was a punitive, harsh environment.<sup>11</sup> The ideals of poorhouse administration and function were far removed from the reality of rules and regulations regarding the inhabitants. Life in the poorhouse was disagreeable, harsh, unforgiving and controlling. Historian Monique Bourque explains: “Almshouse rules and regulations [...] strongly suggest a punitive intent on the part of legislators and relief officials, that is, an effort to make institutional life so unpleasant that most poor folk would avoid it.”<sup>12</sup>

Treatment of poor stemmed from explanations by ministers and city leaders about their situation. The first discussions of poverty centered on religious explanations. “Reverend Cotton Mather wrote in 1726, ‘Tis the lord who has *Taken away* from you, what he has *Given* to others.”<sup>13</sup> Religious explanations such as Mather’s took the blame from the poor themselves and opened the hearts of those willing to give to aid their less fortunate brethren. These were the “Godly

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<sup>10</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> “Rules for the Government of the New York Almshouse, 1801,” in Seth Rockman, *Welfare Reform in the Early Republic: A Brief History with Document*, (Boston and New York, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 98.

<sup>12</sup> Monique Bourque, “Poor Relief “Without Violating the Rights of Humanity”: Almshouse Administration in the Philadelphia region, 1790-1860,” in *Down and Out in Early America*, edited by Billy G. Smith, (University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania University Press, 2004), p. 198.

<sup>13</sup> J. Richard Olivas, “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves: Religious Explanations of Poverty in Colonial Massachusetts, 1630-1776,” in *Down and Out in Early America*, edited by Billy G. Smith, (University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 262.

poor,” and their trial in poverty was part of the Puritan doctrine of predestination, which stated that all things were ordained as part of God’s plan and people were born to their station in life, whether rich or poor. Poor people, who were not to blame for their situation, were free to receive aid from churches and towns, and they received it without condemnation.<sup>14</sup> The religious explanation for poverty lasted only as long as communities were small and the number of impoverished inhabitants remained small. As cities and towns grew and increased numbers of indigent people traveled the countryside seeking jobs and assistance, the religious explanations required adaptation. The idea of God’s predestination gave way “to a religious teaching that placed the burden for poverty squarely on the individual.”<sup>15</sup> The new religious doctrine regarding the poor became the theory that God helps those that help themselves. This idea took the blame from God and placed it upon the individual. As historian Richard J. Olivas states: “God’s hand no longer caused earthly poverty; failure to work with one’s own hands was the culprit.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Early United States**

The alteration in explanations of the presence of the poor was evident in public statements from church and civic leaders. Idle hands and love of vice became the common explanations for the lives of the poor. The 1819 annual report for the Boston Society for the Moral and Religious Instruction of the Poor stated:

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<sup>14</sup> Olivas, “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves: Religious Explanations of Poverty in Colonial Massachusetts, 1630-1776,” in Smith, p. 262.

<sup>15</sup> Olivas, “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves: Religious Explanations of Poverty in Colonial Massachusetts, 1630-1776,” in Smith, p. 264.

<sup>16</sup> Olivas, “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves: Religious Explanations of Poverty in Colonial Massachusetts, 1630-1776,” in Smith, p. 264.

Nine tenths of the pauperism in our country is occasioned by vice; and much the greater part of the public expenses for the support of the poor would be saved, if a great and general effort were made to instruct the ignorant, to encourage industry, and to restrain from the most noxious vices.<sup>17</sup>

The view of vice as responsible for the idle hands of the poor and thus the resultant poverty of their families led to stricter regulations and controls over poor relief and the administration of almshouses. The fear was that making assistance too easy and available for paupers would lead to an increase in beggars. This concern about assistance making more poor will be repeated in modern times.

Heman Humphrey stated in 1818: “many a well fed beggar has, by proclaiming his success in the ears of the idle and unprincipled, induced ten men to embark in the same nefarious speculation. Many a charitable fund has operated as a premium upon improvidence and vice.”<sup>18</sup> Sermons such as Humphrey’s had the effect of increased rules and regulations in regards to the poor. Additionally, poor relief became ever more demeaning and harsh with the new theories on poverty.

When receiving assistance, the poor were subject to the control of city officials and charity workers whether in or out of the poorhouse. The new regulations also came with invasive moral guidelines that included the inspection of homes. In 1801 the Providence Female Society of the Relief of Indigent Women and Children, in its constitution, ruled, “Relief shall not be given to any applicants until they have been visited at their dwelling by one of the managers, and particular enquiry be made into their characters and circumstances.

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<sup>17</sup> “Third annual report of the Boston Society for the Moral and Religious Instruction of the Poor,” presented at their Anniversary, November 8, 1819, in Rockman 83-84.

<sup>18</sup> Heman Humphrey, “On Doing Good to the Poor: A Sermon, Preached at Pittsfield, on the Day of the Annual Fast, April 4, 1818,” in Rockman, 57-58.

Immorality excludes from the patronage of the Society.”<sup>19</sup> Home visits and moral questions were one aspect of the social control of poor relief. Other means of control were in the form of diet and schedule. “Officials hoped to exert both physical and moral influence by controlling paupers’ diets, dictating regular schedules for all activities, and specifying that inmates ‘behave with decency and good manners toward each other.’”<sup>20</sup>

Control of diet, behavior, and home life were not the only ways in which city officials sought to make receipt of assistance undesirable. Poor relief also included a form of humiliation. In 1707 in New York City “local officials required patches of cloth with the letters *N; Y* sewn on their shirts and blouses.”<sup>21</sup> Marking the poor in this manner ensured that only those who had met residency requirements received aid, but it also advertised the pauper’s status to others. This mark of the poor created a system where humiliation would hopefully prevent others from seeking aid.

Early efforts at poor relief failed to alleviate or eliminate the problem of poverty in America. In the nineteenth, century towns, cities, and new states were developing new political and governmental systems, and the problems associated with poverty were forgotten. Local efforts for poor relief fell to the side as more pressing issues of law and statehood took center stage. The early nineteenth century was a time devoted to nationalism and the developing federal and state governments. Poor assistance was not a priority locally or federally. However,

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<sup>19</sup> “Constitution of the Providence Female Society for the Relief of Indigent Women and Children, 1801” in Rockman, 69-70.

<sup>20</sup> Monique Bourque, “Poor Relief “Without Violating the Rights of Humanity”: Almshouse Administration in the Philadelphia region, 1790-1860,” in Smith, p. 191.

<sup>21</sup> Gary B. Nash, “Poverty and Politics in Early American History,” in Smith, 15.



women, who were developing their own role in the new country, began to develop private charities and organizations to combat poverty while simultaneously increasing their moral authority in the United States.

### **Private Assistance in Victorian and Progressive America**

Poor relief in Victorian and Progressive America fell to women. No public assistance programs existed; however, middle class women who were newly freed from the burdens of family farming and subsistence living formed private charities and reform groups to assist poor and working class women. During the nineteenth century, women were uniquely situated to deal with social ills. These women reformers chose to tackle issues that affected the lives of their sisters, mainly problems associated with poverty.

Poverty, during the nineteenth century, revolved around women.

According to scholars of poverty and women's history, women were the most likely to suffer from the economic hardships that affected families, such as low wages, industrialization, and desertion. Historian Christine Stansell explained that women "endured the full force of the economic and social distress of the period [after the Revolutionary War]."<sup>22</sup> Both middle class men and women worked to alleviate the problems of poverty. However, women were often at the forefront and led many efforts to end the problems of poverty. As Stansell points out: "Women were to play an important role in refining and implementing the reformist approach as they made their own determinations about how social change could occur. [...] Charitable ladies directed the attention of their male

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<sup>22</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1987), 36-37.

colleagues, already fastened on the milieu of the laboring poor.”<sup>23</sup> Women established and worked in private charities, worked with poor women and their children, and sought to correct social ills such as prostitution and slavery. Poverty is a women’s issue. Historically, women were the majority of those affected by and attempting to address poverty.

The early national period in America was a period of transition for the United States. As men turned their attention to the affairs of state, poor relief fell under the care of women. The change in poor relief from a men’s occupation to women’s employment led to the development of maternalist welfare policies.

### **Maternalism**

Maternalism grew out of several interlocking ideologies for women in the nineteenth century. Molly Ladd-Taylor provides a comprehensive four-part definition of maternalism in her book, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930*:

(1) There is a uniquely feminine value system based on care and nurturance; (2) mothers perform a service to the state by raising citizen-workers; (3) women are united across class, race, and nation by their common capacity for motherhood and therefore share a responsibility for all the world’s children; and (4) ideally men should earn a family wage to support their “dependent” wives and children at home.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1994) 3.

Maternalist ideology and welfare activism allowed women to expand their roles. By claiming a responsibility to all the world's children, middle class, white Victorian women expanded woman's sphere into the public realm. White middle class women used their traditional roles as mothers to expand into social issues and later politics by caring for those without a "proper" home and family, challenging the men in power to create acceptable programs for the poor women the maternalists cared for.

Female reformers brought maternalist ideals, grounded in definitions of middle class families and woman's place, to their work. These ideals contained prejudice towards women living outside their definition of a family and home; this often meant women without male support. Middle class women, who defined their womanhood and reform work within the societal ideals of family and home, failed to take into account changing and alternative familial patterns. Middle class ideals of intact families in which men earned living wages ignored the realities of poor women's lives, including abandonment and poor wages. The differences between the ideal promoted by middle class women and the reality of poor women's lives created tension between those giving aid and those receiving it.

For privileged white women, assisting the poor was a natural extension of their societal roles as "Republican Mothers." The ideal of "Republican Motherhood" designated the primary role for women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in America. Linda Kerber explains that this ideology "offered one among many structures and contexts in which women might define

the civic culture and their responsibilities to the state.”<sup>25</sup> She further explains: “The Republican Mother’s life was dedicated to the service of civic virtue; she educated her sons for it; she condemned and corrected her husband’s lapses from it.”<sup>26</sup> Women raising moral sons needed to exercise a corrective influence upon their husband and further upon society as a whole. Mothers could not send their morally raised sons into an immoral world. Thus, being responsible for the next generation of American leaders included the duty to mold society. This duty imbued women with a dedication to civic virtue and allowed them to step outside their homes in order to assist the poor.

Historian Christine Stansell illustrates this in her book, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860*, when she says, “Evangelical women and the ministers who encouraged them turned the republican mother into a moral leader.”<sup>27</sup> The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, established in 1797, exemplifies the transformation of republican mothers into moral leaders. The SRPW, the first major women’s reform society, used the ideals of “republican motherhood” to promote its work and expand women’s authority.<sup>28</sup> This organization paved the way for later organizations that developed through women’s ideals in the antebellum era.

The revolutionary - era ideology of Republican Motherhood promoted women’s virtue and value to the new country. The antebellum “Cult of

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<sup>25</sup> Linda Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective,” *American Quarterly*, volume 28 number 2, Special Issue, An American Enlightenment, Summer 1976, 187-205.

<sup>26</sup> Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective,” in *American Quarterly*, p. 187-205.

<sup>27</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1987) 69.

<sup>28</sup> Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, p. 69-70.

Domesticity” built upon those ideals. In her book, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman’s Sphere in New England, 1780-1835*, historian Nancy Cott points to the development of the “Cult of Domesticity” as “the contrast between the home and the world.”<sup>29</sup> The “Cult of Domesticity”, building upon the ideals of “Republican Motherhood” further established women’s place in society and the establishment of “separate spheres” for men and women.

Many historians have explored the separation of male and female worlds into “separate spheres.” Historian Linda Kerber provides the most comprehensive look at the literature surrounding this ideal in Victorian America. She provides several means of viewing this ideal while providing a definition for “separate spheres” in nineteenth century America. Women shared “a distinctive orientation toward gender that derived from shared patterns of work.”<sup>30</sup> Kerber further explains, “When they used the metaphor of separate spheres, historians referred, often interchangeably, to an ideology *imposed on* women, a culture *created by* women, a set of boundaries *expected to be observed by* women.”<sup>31</sup> All of these ideas about femininity and domesticity provided a basis for women aid workers to judge poor women’s lives and expand their own roles.

The home, as the place of refuge from the cruel world, placed women at the heart of society’s salvation as well as the family’s. Furthermore, “motherhood was proposed as the central lever with which women could budge the world and,

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<sup>29</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman’s Sphere in New England, 1780-1835*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1977), 64.

<sup>30</sup> Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History*, volume 75, number 1, June 1988, 9-39.

<sup>31</sup> Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” p. 17.

in practice, it offered the best opportunity to women to heighten their domestic power.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the “Cult of Domesticity” allowed women to “mother” society. Combined with “Republican Motherhood,” the “Cult of Domesticity” provided justification for maternalist assistance to the poor.

The Victorian ideals for women, called the “Cult of True Womanhood” by historian Barbara Welter, combined with the ideals of “Republican Motherhood” and “Domesticity,” contributed to the development of maternalist politics. As Welter explains, “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”<sup>33</sup> The women who adhered to these four virtues epitomized the essence of womanhood and provided an example for others to follow, while the women who received the charitable attentions of such women were judged and found lacking based upon these standards.

Motherhood, as a central requirement to “true womanhood,” was a factor upon which reformers judged poor women. Stansell explains, “Children were especially important, their activities a litmus test of their mothers’ virtue [...] most charitable aid to women after 1820 hinged to some degree on the manner in which they raised their children.”<sup>34</sup> Families seeking assistance often survived without male support, which automatically placed them outside the ideals of “True Womanhood.” Women with dirty unkempt homes and children on the

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<sup>32</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman’s Sphere in New England, 1780-1835*, p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly*, volume 18 number 2 part 1, Summer 1966, 151-174.

<sup>34</sup> Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, p. 73.

streets failed at domesticity and “True Womanhood,” according to reformer’s ideals. The caseworkers’ sense of appropriate housekeeping and motherhood required strict adherence on the part of aid recipients yet failed to take into account the role poverty played in their lack. Linda Gordon explains, “child savers tended to misinterpret the situation of the street children, considering them *ipso facto* unloved and neglected.”<sup>35</sup> Child neglect, as a violation of True Womanhood’s emphasis on domesticity, often led to the removal of children from their families by child savers.

Maternalism gave rise to charitable organizations designed to assist working class women and their children. These ideals contributed to the rise of settlement houses and orphanages, such as Hull House founded in 1889, the New York Foundling Hospital created in 1870, and the Colorado Cottage Home built in 1886. These homes of refuge provided women and children “with a lifelong substitute for family life.”<sup>36</sup> Hull House, in particular, provided important support to women, teaching them skills and providing a safe home for their cultivation. These settlement homes and orphanages, combined with religious and private charities, were the main providers of assistance in Victorian and Progressive America. Historian Kriste Lindenmeyer explains this in *“A Right to Childhood”*: *The U.S. Children’s Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-1946*: “Reformers involved in the female dominated settlement house movement sat at the forefront of

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<sup>35</sup> Linda Gordon, *Heroes of their own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence*, (New York, Penguin Books, 1988) 125.

<sup>36</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Hull House in the 1890s: A community of Women Reformers,” in *Women and Power in American History* volume 2, from 1870, Eds. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1991), 56. Hull House took in single women as well as divorced or deserted women, other settlement homes provided for abandoned or orphaned children or unwed mothers, providing a home and alternative to the streets.

“maternalist politics.”<sup>37</sup> Settlement houses brought national attention to issues of women’s health and welfare; they also contributed to the rise of women’s political influence.

Women believed they were uniquely able to deal with the problems associated with assisting the poor. In her book, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939*, Peggy Pascoe sees settlement houses as a foundation for women’s expanding sphere. The women in Pascoe’s study, particularly those working with young unwed mothers, “found it especially easy to see them as surrogate daughters in need of protection.”<sup>38</sup>

Mission home women often found they needed to save “lost” mothers. Linda Gordon has also attributed the need to mother society to early maternalist women, “Viewing the poor as in need of moral and spiritual as well as economic help, middle-class women sometimes imagined giving that help as a mother to a child, combining sympathy with authority.”<sup>39</sup>

Maternalist politics developed in the United States out of Victorian ideals for womanhood; however, their development was not limited to the U.S., as evidenced in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, edited by Seth Koven and Sonya Michel. This collection of essays places maternalist politics in international perspective. Koven and Michel explain in their introduction, “In these industrializing countries middle-class

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<sup>37</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, “A Right to Childhood”: *The U.S. Children’s Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46*. (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990) 60.

<sup>39</sup> Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935*, (New York, The Free Press, 1994), 55.



women were usually the first to identify the social-welfare needs of poor and working-class mothers and children and the first to respond to them through a wide array of charitable activities.”<sup>40</sup> Industrializing nations such as France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States saw the formation of first, private charities and then, governmental provisions to assist mothers and children. These essays explore the international development of maternalist politics and provide an understanding of their social-welfare programs.

Maternalist politics played an important role in the development of social-welfare programs, nationally and internationally. The development of government programs such as mothers’ pensions, the Children’s Bureau, and the Sheppard-Towner Act grew out of the private charity movements and settlement houses started and run by women. These programs represent the rise of feminine political influence and the role women played in aiding other women, both directly through personal charity and indirectly through lobbying men in power. They also illustrate the maternalist aspect of social-welfare programs, which grew out of the Victorian ideals and were instituted by women who came of age in that era and maintained the ideals of separate spheres.

The Progressive Era brought changes to social welfare policies, including the establishment of mothers’ pensions. Started at the state level beginning in Illinois and spreading through other state legislatures, mothers’ pensions granted authority to local governments to pay poor women direct cash benefits to stay

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<sup>40</sup> “Introduction: “Mother Worlds,” by Seth Koven and Sonya Michel in Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds. *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, (New York and London, Routledge 1993) 6.

home and care for their children.<sup>41</sup> Forty states instituted mothers' pensions programs before 1920, providing a precedent to the passage of federal programs. By providing women without male breadwinners with money to stay at home to care for their children, the mother's pensions program established local governments as the family's "male" support, thus maintaining the patriarchal order of society.<sup>42</sup>

Extending middle-class ideals of womanhood beyond the home created maternalist political movements that aimed at allowing poor women to achieve these same ideals.

The originators of mothers' pension laws intended to include needy mothers in the same moral universe as themselves, providing them with regular and non-demeaning material assistance to make it possible for them to realize a version of the same basic ideals of homemaking and motherhood to which the ladies themselves aspired.<sup>43</sup>

Mothers' pensions would allow the poor women to achieve a sense of domesticity by providing them with money to remain home and care for their children.

Women reformers' ideals of womanhood and domesticity were crucial in their views of all women; they sought to turn poor women into ideal models of "true womanhood."

The Federal Children's Bureau, established in April 1912 as the first federal agency headed by a woman, signified the maternalist influence in society. Its establishment was the culmination of years of lobbying by Hull House

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<sup>41</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*. (Cambridge and London, The Belknap Press, 1992), p. 424.

<sup>42</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 313.

<sup>43</sup> Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, p. 479.

veterans Lillian D. Wald, Florence Kelly, and Julia Lathrop.<sup>44</sup> The Children's Bureau was a significant development in women's work for the poor.

The culmination of maternalist politics in the United States came with the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act in 1921, which established clinics for prenatal care and post-natal education with the hope of reducing infant mortality rates.<sup>45</sup> Ladd-Taylor explains, "Designed by Children's Bureau Chief Julia Lathrop, the Sheppard-Towner Act exemplified the political philosophy and program of maternalism."<sup>46</sup> The Sheppard-Towner Act, while progressive in its care of and treatment for mothers and children, was not a challenge to their dependent status. Rather, it reinforced their position as mothers in the home. This signifies the importance of "separate spheres" to women such as Julia Lathrop, who came of age in Victorian America. The Sheppard-Towner Act did not change women's overall position in society; however, it is significant in the development and culmination of maternalist politics. Women wrote the bill, and women ran the organizations and distributed the funds. The act "reflected women's growing political influence."<sup>47</sup>

Maternalist ideals based upon the notions of Victorian womanhood contributed to the development of social-welfare programs, both private and public. These notions of "True Womanhood" also played a role in the determination of deserving and undeserving poor. Morality and perceptions of

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<sup>44</sup> Lindenmeyer, 1-10. Wald and Kelly, veterans of the Settlement House movement both lived in Hull House as explained by Kathryn Kish Sklar in her essay, "Hull House in the 1890s: A Community of Women reformers."

<sup>45</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, (Cambridge and London, The Belknap Press, 1992), 10.

<sup>46</sup> Ladd-Taylor, *Motherwork: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930*, p. 166.

<sup>47</sup> Lindenmeyer, "A Right to Childhood": *The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46*, p. 76.

immorality were crucial in the determination of who received aid. People receiving aid, from colonial days through the early twentieth century, found themselves subjected to questions of moral fitness in order to determine their worthiness for assistance. The maternalist ideology reinforced ideas of deserving versus undeserving poor while also adding a feminine aspect.<sup>48</sup> Being poor often stigmatized women as failing in the ideals of motherhood and womanhood.

### **Morality**

Maternalist ideology promoted the values of “True Womanhood” and expected adherence to a particular brand of morality. Women, especially poor women, were subject to value judgments regarding their morality. The judgments came from women reformers and charity workers. The middle class women working to alleviate poverty embraced the ideals of “True Womanhood,” which included purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity.<sup>49</sup> These traits constituted the moral grounds upon which middle class women judged their poorer sisters. Morality in private charities meant adherence to these four key ideals and determined the worthiness of aid recipients. Morality played an important role in the establishment of assistance.

America’s industrialization in the late eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries altered the position of women. Previously women worked as part of a family unit, contributing to the home economy by producing goods for the family consumption as well as for trade and barter. In her book, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*, Jeanne

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<sup>48</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, p. 72-73.

<sup>49</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” in *American Quarterly*, p. 151-174.

Boydston explains: "By manufacturing directly for their families, women enabled their households to increase their independence from the cash market."<sup>50</sup> Men labored for cash wages while women supplemented the family economy through laboring at home. The rise of industrialization made manufactured goods more available and less expensive. Industrialization redefined middle and upper class women's labor. Middle class women changed from participants in the economics of the household to economic dependents.

Industrialization also increased urban poverty among the working class.<sup>51</sup> Manufacturing on a large scale ended the possibilities for working class men to achieve their own shop after years of apprenticeship. Artisans found their skills devalued in light of mass production. The changing working world of industrialization made working class women more subject to poverty. Additionally, working class women were more likely to be deserted. However, they were still subject to the same ideals of middle and upper class women, including morality.

In industrial America, upper and middle class women were elevated in the eyes of society. At the same time, women - especially poor women - were subjected to value judgments based upon the new ideologies that accompanied industrialization, including the cult of domesticity, the doctrine of separate spheres, and the cult of true womanhood. These ideals were impossible for lower class women to achieve.

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<sup>50</sup> Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*, (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990), 40.

<sup>51</sup> Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*, p. 150-155.

Limited means also motivated charity workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to strictly judge those they assisted. Linda Gordon explains the prevalence of this determination in the government's mothers' aid programs: "The shortage of funding merely strengthened a preexisting commitment to morals testing and supervision of clients and potential clients, pursued through narrowing eligibility to an ideally respectable few."<sup>52</sup> Thus, morals testing occupied an important place in the minds of reform workers who determined which women to assist.

Reformers used all the measures of "True Womanhood" to judge whether recipients were deserving of assistance. Purity, as a measure of "True Womanhood," was often used a marker for poor women's worthiness to receive assistance. Purity was crucial to women's morality, and many aspects of women's behavior could mark them as immoral. As Linda Gordon explains: "The most frequent measure of a suitable home was sexual behavior. The presence of a man in the home or the birth of an illegitimate child, made the home unsuitable."<sup>53</sup> In addition to sexual behavior, commonly cited grounds for denying assistance included drinking, violence and un-cleanliness.

Piety was another important factor for the private charity workers. Women charity workers sought to create an image of their charges as "a gentle and wounded spirit who partook of the piety and deference of the traditional

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<sup>52</sup> Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 298.

worthy poor.”<sup>54</sup> The image of the poor pious woman in need of assistance fostered the need, among charity workers, for references vouching to the women’s piety.

The ideal of piety is evident in the experiences of the home mission women who, according to Peggy Pascoe, believed that “the Christian home was a good thing, and in it the Christian husband bowed to the moral authority of the true woman.”<sup>55</sup> Piety in the form of Christianity represented an important aspect of life that all women should embrace. Thus, the workers at the Cottage Home in Colorado often “prescribed Christian conversion under the guidance of the surrogate mother matrons [...] as the best way to ‘exorcise’ loss of moral purity.”<sup>56</sup> Conversion to the Christian ideals of “true womanhood” was important to the women home workers.

Lower class women often found themselves abandoned and forced to enter the workforce. The type of work women performed could mark them as undeserving of assistance. Stansell explains, “Women’s paid work, too, came under scrutiny: Waged sewing, other put out work and domestic service were acceptable.”<sup>57</sup> These wage earning positions, while deemed acceptable by charity workers, provided an insufficient income for women, with or without male support. Often women turned to other means of support such as boarding, selling wares in the street, or prostitution, all of which provided a better living than the

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<sup>54</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, p. 72.

<sup>55</sup> Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue*, p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue*, p. 41.

<sup>57</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, p. 73.

“acceptable” employments.<sup>58</sup> Charity workers deemed these women ineligible for assistance.

Several factors related to prevailing ideals of womanhood determined moral acceptability. One of the most important was domesticity. This is evident in the policies of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows (SRPW) that exemplified the use of home in determinations of poor women worthy of aid. The SRPW visited homes and “in the early 1820s [passed] a string of resolutions that limited home visits to certain sections of the city.”<sup>59</sup> By limiting the areas of the city their women could enter, the SRPW delineated areas where “moral” poor women could live. Women reformers made judgments regarding worthy and unworthy poor using geographical markers; however, poor women often had little choice in where they could afford to live. Thus, the “Cult of Domesticity” encouraged discrimination against poor women.

Caseworkers' own sense of domesticity also influenced their view of clients. Linda Gordon explores this aspect of casework in her book, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence:*

All poor or employed mothers failed their children of both sexes: they did not provide proper role models for girls, and neglected training in the domestic arts; they deprived boys of true fathers, either by living without them or by demoting them from their entitled place as breadwinners and family heads.<sup>60</sup>

Inappropriate employments or lacking male support, both improper for “true women,” threatened society’s patriarchal structure as these women were not

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<sup>58</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, p. 73.

<sup>59</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, p. 69.

<sup>60</sup> Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence – Boston 1880-1960*. (New York, Penguin Books, 1988) 84.



dependent upon a male breadwinner. These traits also endangered women's ability to receive aid. Mimi Abramovitz explains this when she says, "private charities made distinctions between women they regarded as 'deserving' or 'undeserving' of aid which assured the moral stature and independence of the poor and preserved the patriarchal family."<sup>61</sup> Another important aspect for private charity workers was submissiveness. The "cult of True Womanhood" required women be submissive to their male heads-of-household. Private charities sought to maintain the patriarchal order of society; therefore, clients became submissive to their female caseworkers because they lacked a husband. This ensured the "proper" order of society and an adherence to the standards of womanhood. The focus on a male head-household to provide legitimacy will be important in the twentieth century welfare programs as well. Caseworkers (both private and professional) used the ideals of woman's sphere to judge the fitness of their clients. The clients often failed to live up to those ideals due to poverty. Thus, caseworkers classified them as immoral and undeserving of aid.

Ethnic and racial origins also affected a recipient's worthiness for receiving aid. Worthiness for assistance centered on adherence to "true womanhood," which centered on white middle class women's values. Receipt of aid required black woman and immigrants to conform to white standards of femininity and morality. Thus, the maternalist aid workers' moral judgments often led to ethnic and racial bias.

### **Ethnicity and Race**

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<sup>61</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 151.

Between the Civil War and the Progressive Era, (when maternalist politics gained full momentum) immigration and emancipation made race and ethnicity significant factors in formations of social welfare policies and administration of assistance. Historian Gwendolyn Mink explores this phenomenon in her book, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942*. Mink explains the significance of “Americanization” to maternalist welfare policies: “Though it demanded the civic integration of southern and eastern European immigrants and people of color it required in exchange, their assimilation to a common, dominant culture.”<sup>62</sup> The rise of welfare programs, both private and public, gave meaning to “Americanization” in regards to morality and worthiness for receiving assistance. Social workers desired immigrants to abandon their cultural ideas of family and home, adopting the Anglo version in order to receive assistance. Mink explains: “Measuring a mothers’ quality by her proximity to an Anglo-American, middle class norm, maternalist policies bred a strict racial liberalism that conditioned equality on similarity.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, ethnicity and proximity to “Americanization” determined aid receipt.

Immigrants and blacks suffered disadvantages due to racial and ethnic prejudices. Easily classified as immoral based upon the ideas of cultural inferiority, they seldom received the assistance that whites obtained. Mink explains, “Though the criteria for moral fitness were sometimes delineated in

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<sup>62</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, *The wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942*, (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>63</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, *The wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942*, p. 26. Theda Skocpol also points to this when she explains: “In urbanized localities, about 40 to 60 percent of those receiving mothers’ pensions were foreign-born immigrants. Such women were sometimes required to apply for citizenship as a condition of receiving aid, and social workers might use cultural criteria of “Americanism” in evaluating their applications or judging their continued eligibility for assistance.” (p. 469, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*)

pensions legislation, wide discretion was ordinarily delegated to administrators and social workers – most of whom were white and middle class.”<sup>64</sup> Mink explains that allowing for personal discretion made it possible for administrators in the South to deny aid to blacks and for those in the North to discriminate against immigrant families. Racial and ethnic prejudices in the welfare system coincided with the rise of the eugenics movement and its assertion of inferior character among non-whites. “For mothers who did not meet the criteria of Anglo-Saxon morality, denial of pensions represented a form of political eugenics.”<sup>65</sup>

Linda Gordon further explains the connections between moral testing and racism. In her study of Boston, she uses the records of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (MSPCC), which was established in the 1870s. These records indicate caseworkers in the MSPCC subjected immigrants to ethnic classification. She explains: “They [caseworkers] saw cruelty to children as a vice of inferior classes and cultures which needed correction and ‘raising up’ to an ‘American’ standard.”<sup>66</sup> She further explains that nineteenth-century reformers “were affected by class, ethnic and cultural anxieties.”<sup>67</sup> Gordon supports this idea with notes from case records that often labeled Irish as “drunkards” and Italians “abusive.” These judgments illustrate the prevalent prejudice against immigrants and ethnic minorities.

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<sup>64</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “The Lady and the Tramp: Gender, Race, and the Origins of the American Welfare State” in *Women, the State and Welfare*, Linda Gordon ed., (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) 110.

<sup>65</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “The Lady and the Tramp: Gender, Race, and the Origins of the American Welfare State,” in Gordon, ed. P. 110.

<sup>66</sup> Gordon, *Heroes of their Own Lives*, p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, p. 28.

Historian Joanne Goodwin further illustrates racial judgments. Using statistics from mothers' pension records in Chicago, as well as the census between 1911 and 1931, Goodwin shows that African American families were underrepresented in the mothers' pensions program. As she explains, "In 1920, for example, when African Americans accounted for 4 percent of the population and 8 percent of the families on relief, they received only 3 percent of the pensions. [...] When one considers the higher rate of mother-only families among African Americans, their low participation rate on mothers' pensions is highlighted further."<sup>68</sup> Mink's study compares private relief systems to the government's mothers' pension program. Her examination of the two systems of assistance demonstrates the racism in government programs; blacks were often referred to private charities for assistance while whites gained access to government programs.<sup>69</sup> Vast numbers of African American women entered the workforce to support their families, often relying on other family members for childcare. The explanation for their numbers in the workforce is the rejection of their applications for mothers' pensions. African American women received less assistance than other ethnic minorities, yet all minorities suffered from discrimination in public relief programs.

As mothers' pensions and New Deal social security benefits became more available and accessible, the need for private charity organizations lessened. At

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<sup>68</sup> Joanne Goodwin, "Mothers Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1931," in Anya Jabour, ed., *Major Problems in the History of American Families and Children*, (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 310.

<sup>69</sup> Joanne Goodwin, "Mothers Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1931," in Anya Jabour, ed., *Major Problems in the History of American Families and Children*, (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 310.

the same time, social work became professionalized. This altered the aid workers and recipients as well as the nature of welfare and social work. The newly professionalized field of social work was vastly different from private charities run by maternalist women.

### **Professionalization of Social Work**

The profession of social work grew out of the private charity organizations of the late nineteenth century. Women running settlement homes and private aid societies lobbied for protection of children and legal rights for women; their work created the Children's Bureau and helped pass the Sheppard-Towner Act. Professionalization of social work can be traced to the founding of the Children's Bureau in 1912 as the first federally organized group concerned with the public welfare.

The professionalization of social work transformed the practice of caring for the poor. Historian Stephanie Shaw points out, "The field of social work, like librarianship, at first required no formal school course."<sup>70</sup> The first professional social workers worked through the Charity Organization Societies (COS) and their job consisted of coordinating the distribution of private charities and donations while trying to improve the situations of the poor. The local charity visitors and their "friendly" visits faded away with the creation of formal schooling for social work. The first formal school of social work, the New York School of Philanthropy, consisted of a six-week summer course developed and sponsored by the COS began in New York in 1898. The program expanded in

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<sup>70</sup> Shaw. 142. *What a Woman Ought to Be and To Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era*, (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 142.

1903-04 to a year- long course and in 1910, it became a two-year course.<sup>71</sup> The founding of the New York School of Philanthropy in 1898, as the first school for training professional social workers, started a trend in education. Twenty years after its founding, seventeen social work schools were in existence.<sup>72</sup> As schools for the training of professional social workers appeared, the American Association of Social Workers (AASW), founded in 1921, developed professional standards to give the profession of social work respect and develop national guidelines.<sup>73</sup>

The professionalization of social work coincided with “new emphasis by physicians, sociologists, and psychologists on childhood as a special period of life with specific needs.”<sup>74</sup> The new scientific theories for childhood occurred as there was a transformation in society. Younger women found their older counterparts’ Victorian ideals outdated. The idea of passionless women faded away in the wake of “a modern gender system; one that threatened to render obsolete the images of female purity, true women, and Christian gentlemen so dear to the hearts of home mission women.”<sup>75</sup> The development of “scientific” standards in the newly professionalized field of social work, combined with the transformed attitudes toward sexuality, made it difficult to sell the image of the seduced and abandoned young woman in need of saving. This reduced the moral authority the Victorian women had established.

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<sup>71</sup> Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and To Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era*, (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 142.

<sup>72</sup> Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls, Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1993), p. 38.

<sup>73</sup> Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, p. 38-40.

<sup>74</sup> Lindenmeyer, “*A Right to Childhood*,” p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue*, p.193.

The social and professional changes also meant that social workers, distanced from the Victorian ideals, were unmoved by images of “fallen” women. Instead, they regarded their clients as problematic. Private charity women viewed single mothers as the greatest threat to the morality of the nation. Gordon attributes this to caseworkers’ fear of the breakdown of the traditional family, explaining that being single (unwed) while pregnant or raising children automatically classified women as immoral.<sup>76</sup> In light of this threat, moral societies, clubwomen, and religious welfare organization targeted single mothers. Most reformers felt that “single motherhood was a temporary and unusual misfortune which, although perhaps it could never be abolished, could be drastically reduced in incidence in a society providing greater physical and economic security.”<sup>77</sup>

Nineteenth century reformers placed blame on men’s irresponsibility. By placing the blame on men rather than the young women, reformers used the ideals from Victorian America to paint these young women as “victims” of the male sexual double standard. In this light single mothers became “fallen women” to save. In her study of the Colorado Cottage home, Pascoe illustrates the picture Victorian women created of young pregnant women: “reformers argued that, as all women were naturally pure, those who had ‘fallen’ must be victims rather than perpetrators.”<sup>78</sup> They presented a “frightening collage of women seduced and abandoned and children deserted or orphaned.”<sup>79</sup> By using these ideals from

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<sup>76</sup> Gordon, *Heroes*, 28-30.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 35.

<sup>78</sup> Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue*, p. 60.

<sup>79</sup> Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue*, p. 18.

Victorian society, moral reformers justified their work by illustrating they could “Christianize” and therefore save these young women and prevent the further decay of the traditional family.

For Victorian charity workers, a poor woman who had been sexually illicit but had reformed was entitled to aid; however, with the professionalization of social work, this scenario changed. In her groundbreaking work, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work 1890-1945*, historian Regina G. Kunzel traces how the previously viewed seduced and abandoned “fallen women” became sexually promiscuous “problem girls.” Kunzel explains, “Beginning in the late 1910s, unmarried mothers attracted the attention of social workers, who, with the emergence and growth of their profession in the early twentieth century, claimed illegitimacy to be within their ever expanding domain.”<sup>80</sup> As social work became professionalized, the view of young women as victims of men’s sexual double standard changed. The new class of professionally trained social workers did not apply the same Victorian standards to their clients; thus the “fallen women” to be saved became “problem girls” to be dealt with. Kunzel explains, “Unlike social workers, evangelical reformers had always been careful to distinguish unmarried mothers from delinquents.”<sup>81</sup> Distinguishing between these two groups was significant in the private charities that assisted unmarried mothers; however, for social workers,

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<sup>80</sup> Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls, Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1993), 55.

<sup>81</sup> Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, p. 36.



“the line between unmarried mothers and delinquents progressively blurred.”<sup>82</sup> In the social work records, unmarried mother and sexual delinquent became interchangeable terms. In effect, the social work profession shifted from a stance of compassionate saving to a position of judgmental condemnation.

As professionally trained caseworkers replaced benevolent mothers, casework replaced compassion. Casework was a scientific approach to charitable giving. Gordon calls casework the “professionalized form of maternalism.”<sup>83</sup> The professionalization of social work gave rise to a welfare profession centered on casework. “Caseworkers began with the collection of the most complete information possible about any individual or family, with the aim of long term independence.”<sup>84</sup> A complete family history would allow caseworkers a comprehensive picture of a client’s needs. Moreover, professional caseworkers emphasized “efficiency” rather than maternalism.

Benevolent charity’s demise came with the professional social worker. Many volunteers were opposed to this transfer of authority. Private charities were opposed to the governmental intrusion, “in part because they wished to retain control of their traditional turf.”<sup>85</sup> Private charities desired a division of responsibility so that they could maintain care for people at home; they proposed handing over responsibility for clients in institutions to government workers.<sup>86</sup> The incorporation of private charity workers into the federal program for mother’s

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<sup>82</sup> Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, p. 55.

<sup>83</sup> Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, p. 103.

<sup>84</sup> Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, p. 62.

<sup>85</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 199.

<sup>86</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 199.

pensions resolved the conflict between the two arenas, but sped the demise of private charities in favor of professional social work.

The professionalization of social work would influence the development of welfare policies from the New Deal through the post World War Two era and into the 1960s. Maternalist welfare effectively ended with the professionalization of social work and the government establishment of welfare offices. Families in need now received condemnation and demeaning lectures with a small amount of monetary assistance.

### **Conclusion**

Poverty has been problematic in America from the earliest days of colonization. Early methods of poor relief consisted of workhouses as well as “outdoor” relief, which provided food, clothing and fuel to “deserving” widows and orphans. In the post-revolutionary period, poor relief changed due to the rise of maternalism and women’s roles in society. Maternalist politics led to women’s organizations for assisting the poor. These included homes for unwed mothers and organizations that fought against the sexual double standard. Maternalists enforced the ideals of women’s morality and placed the blame for young, unwed, abandoned mothers on men’s shoulders. Morality played an important role in women’s assistance to the poor.

Ethnic and racial prejudices were rampant in the private charities. Matronly, maternalist women viewed people who did not meet the Anglo-American standards as inferior and undeserving of assistance. The leadership of private charities was white, middle class, women, and their leadership expanded

women's roles. However, they also expected others to meet their standards, which reflect their racial prejudice, their class membership and their gender expectations. These factors influenced the relief they offered. Immigrants and African Americans found it difficult to find aid, as they often failed to meet the Anglo standards private charities looked for. As social work became professionalized, prejudice against other ethnicities was combined with social workers' negative view of unwed mothers to make receiving assistance more difficult.

The progressive era represented unprecedented political power for women. Women were able to influence the legislative process and make gains for mothers, including mothers' pensions. The progressive era also saw the increase in professionally trained social workers. Government began to replace private charity and the newly trained social workers replaced the Victorian women volunteers. These changes in the arena of poor relief created stricter regulations and increased prejudice.

The governmental take-over of public assistance retained some of the aspects of the private charity system. The newly formed government program allowed for local control of rules and regulations regarding assistance. As in private programs, local eligibility was determined by local governance. Local control over eligibility meant that prejudice did not end with the government aid programs. Women who sought assistance received judgments of their worthiness based upon their morality – often a coded term for race. Additionally, local officials retained home checks. The “no man in the house rule” of welfare

officials replicated the morality checks of private charities. The compassionate aspects of private charity did not occur in the governmental programs, but the negative aspects of racial prejudice and questions of morality did. Racism and sexism would remain embedded in public assistance programs under the government.

The mothers' pension program was the first step towards a nationalized federal welfare program. In 1935, the New Deal programs established the Social Security Act (SSA), which included the program Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). ADC nationalized welfare. The new welfare state was incomplete at its inception. The New Deal programs relied heavily upon cooperation from the Southern states for passage and this brought about compromises in the program development. Racial policies remained in the new program. The Civil Rights movement challenged the racist status quo in many areas, including local control of welfare programs. It is during the civil rights movement that welfare began to be equalized racially. New Deal programs built the welfare program and Civil Rights expanded it. The next chapter of this paper will focus on the building and expanding of the welfare state, 1935-1965.

## **Chapter Two: Building and Expanding the Welfare State - 1935-1965**

Social welfare policy expanded under the Social Security Act (SSA) of 1935. The SSA replaced local mothers' pensions programs with a national system of assistance. The national welfare program established under the New Deal was the first national program that acknowledged the U.S. government's responsibility to care for the social welfare of its citizens. New Deal assistance programs raised hopes in a time of economic depression when "public support was high for programs that protected the many against the abuses of the few and taxed the few for the benefit of the many."<sup>1</sup> Jill Quadagno explains the benefit of New Deal programs; "The Social Security Act laid the groundwork for a national welfare state and established some benefits as an earned right."<sup>2</sup> Social welfare programs in the ensuing decades extended assistance to many previously ineligible for aid. This expanded the national welfare state. However, the new welfare state maintained the negative aspects of the private systems. Specifically, the sexist and racist prejudices remained.

Women reformers sought to make the new welfare program similar to the mothers' pensions, meaning that eligible mothers were often married and stayed at home with their children. Instead, the new program changed the terms and meanings of assistance. Theda Skocpol explains, "Clients increasingly became very impoverished families in which mothers were divorced or not married or widows of men without histories of wage earning in occupations covered by

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<sup>1</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 20.

social insurance.”<sup>3</sup> While the SSA was not what the women reformers hoped for, it did assist women in four key ways:

First: retired women workers in occupations covered by the act were insured under the old age security program [...] Second, the act offered health services to eligible pregnant women or mothers of eligible children. Third, the act provided a lump sum benefit to the survivor (usually the widow) of an insured worker (usually a wage earning male). Fourth, the act offered public assistance to needy children under the age of sixteen who were deprived of breadwinning parental support and who continued to live with a relative engaged in their fulltime care.<sup>4</sup>

The most significant aspect of these provisions for women was a program known as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). The fourth provision of the SSA created and administered the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program. This program gave grants to states in order to provide cash assistance to children under the age of sixteen who were “deprived of parental support or care by reason of the death, continued absence from the home, or physical or mental incapacity of a parent.”<sup>5</sup> ADC allowed mothers to remain in the home with their children even though their family did not have a male breadwinner. Providing monetary support, however meager, to women so that they could care for their children was a step toward creating a national welfare state.

The ADC program, a culmination of generations of women reformers’ work in seeking assistance for the nation’s children, divided control between the states and the federal government. The program, instituted by the federal government and governed by the states, “was a major step toward systemization

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<sup>3</sup> Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, p. 536.

<sup>4</sup> Mink, *Wages of Motherhood*, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Social Security Act of 1935, Title IV – Grants to States for Aid to Dependent Children.

and homogenization of provision.”<sup>6</sup> This step moved social welfare programs forward, although it still contained inequalities.

The ADC program replaced state programs, applied locally, with federal programs, applied at the state level.<sup>7</sup> The establishment of ADC was only the first, albeit the most important, step in the development of a national entitlement program. With the first step taken, women reformers set about to improve the government’s program. Maternalist women found the SSA to be an improvement over the private assistance programs but felt that funding for the ADC program needed to be increased, emphasizing “the social importance of the domestic mother to family security.”<sup>8</sup> Arguing that elderly and disabled people received greater amounts of assistance than mothers and children, women sought to change the assistance regulations and to improve the ADC section of the Social Security Act. The efforts of the women reformers led to the altering of ADC benefits and an increase of funding, providing more benefits to women and children yet increasing dependency.

The first reform of ADC came with the SSA amendments of 1939, which increased federal funding for ADC and raised the maximum age of “dependent” children from sixteen to eighteen for children still attending school.<sup>9</sup> The increased funding was designed to correct the inequalities between what mothers received for their children and what the old and disabled received. However, it fell short of what reformers desired. The aged and blind still received more than

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 274.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 274.

<sup>8</sup> Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 134-135.

<sup>9</sup> Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 135.

mothers and children, and women reformers sought to make “protection of the family and home” a priority issue.<sup>10</sup> Monetary support for the aged and blind constituted an entitlement, while money for the mothers was a handout from the federal government. The amounts given as entitlements would continuously be more than amounts considered a handout. However, even though the amendments did not fulfill the reformers’ desires, the new provision for children aged sixteen to eighteen who remained in school encouraged education for children of poor families who otherwise might have left school to contribute to the family income.

While the ADC program accomplished much in the formation of a national welfare system, it had drawbacks. The program was exclusionary in many ways, including morals testing. Most significantly, New Deal programs promulgated discrimination nationally. Morals testing were the basis of much of the discrimination, nationally and locally. Assumptions regarding gender and race influenced policies that targeted black women as employable and immoral. Jill Quadagno, in her book, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*, explores the national scope of prejudice against blacks. In discussing New Deal programs, she states, “Because of southern opposition, agricultural workers and domestic servants – most black men and women- were left out of the core programs of the Social Security Act.”<sup>11</sup> Even at the national level, blacks experienced discrimination in the determination of social welfare benefits and

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<sup>10</sup> Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 135.

<sup>11</sup> Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*, (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 21.



“were relegated to the social-assistance programs, where local welfare authorities could determine benefit levels and set eligibility rules.”<sup>12</sup>

In referring blacks to local welfare offices, the federal government abdicated its responsibility to African Americans. Barred from participation in the New Deal’s social insurance program, blacks also found themselves excluded from programs designed to alleviate the difficulties faced by single-parent families. Historian Joanne Goodwin examines how New Deal social welfare programs worked in conjunction with racism in local southern agencies. Goodwin’s study of administration records for ADC in southern states for the years 1935-1939 shows that African-American women were under-represented on the welfare rolls. This is explained by local culture and attitudes.<sup>13</sup> One aspect of the local culture and attitudes included “a unanimous feeling on the part of the [welfare] staff and board that there are more work opportunities for Negro women ... The attitude that ‘they have always gotten along and that ‘all they’ll do is have more children’ is definite.”<sup>14</sup> Black women suffered in the application process for ADC due to perceived employability. As Mink explains, “the presumption of employability that applied to childless white women was imposed upon African American women as a whole.”<sup>15</sup> In this way, the New Deal sacrificed mother-headed African American families in favor of providing support to white mothers and reinforced the color code in the South by allowing racism to continue.

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<sup>12</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Joanne Goodwin, “‘Employable Mothers’ and ‘suitable work’: a Re-evaluation of Welfare and Wage Earning for Women in the Twentieth-Century United States,” in *Journal of Social History*, Winter 1995, volume 29, number 2, 253-275.

<sup>14</sup> Goodwin, “‘Employable Mothers’”, 253-275

<sup>15</sup> Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 142.

In addition to presumptions of employability, black single mothers faced the barrier of morals testing. Stereotypes about black women's morality affected their eligibility for assistance. Rickie Solinger explains: "The construction of black women as unrestrained wanton breeders, on the one hand, or calculating breeders for profit on the other, could raise the moral and fiscal hackles of white communities all over the nation and did."<sup>16</sup> Black women had been condemned as immoral for decades. Stephanie Shaw, in her book *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, explains, "The negative public image [of black women] was rooted in slavery when owners and overseers sexually assaulted enslaved women and then referred to them as lascivious."<sup>17</sup> The prejudice against black single motherhood, combined with morals testing, was exemplified in the fact that in five southern states, aid was denied based on the child's birth status.<sup>18</sup> The states with the strictest regulations regarding morality and illegitimacy also had the largest African American populations.

Black families were discriminated against at the state and local level of the federal program. States used the federal funds and regulations and devised their own guidelines for aid recipients, which allowed discrimination against black needy families. Kriste Lindenmeyer explains, "local discretion in implementation of the aid to dependent children program and other child welfare services shows that the bureau did not accomplish its goal to 'equalize' opportunity for children

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<sup>16</sup> Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade* (New York and London, Routledge, 1992), 43.

<sup>17</sup> Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 23-24.

<sup>18</sup> Mink, *The Wage of Motherhood*, p. 144.

under its New Deal proposals.”<sup>19</sup> The Children’s Bureau sought to create programs that would assist all the nation’s needy children, but local discretion undermined that desire.

Further problems with equalization of assistance were caused by the fact that participation in the ADC program was not required in all states; for example, as late as 1943, Texas had not appropriated funds or established a program for dependent children.<sup>20</sup> The discretion left in the hands of state lawmakers as well as local welfare offices threatened to undermine the purpose of the ADC program, as local administrators, backed by state lawmakers, could - and often did - deny blacks access to aid. Gwendolyn Mink explains, “local determination of need and fitness permitted variation in grant levels and exclusion on moral grounds of families otherwise eligible.”<sup>21</sup>

Maternalist reformers were distraught at the local exclusions and sought various remedies. “At the conference on Service for Negro Children convened by the Children’s Bureau in 1944, maternalists mapped out a plan to confront the problem of race for child welfare, maternal citizenship and the political community.”<sup>22</sup> The maternalist reformers continued a trend of the nineteenth century charity workers to care for all the children of society. The women reformers placed the burden for “fixing” the system upon themselves rather than placing it on the shoulders of rich, white, male, lawmakers. These women felt that the solution to the racial problem in the ADC program was the “cultural

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<sup>19</sup> Lindenmeyer, *A Right to Childhood*, p. 200.

<sup>20</sup> Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 140.

<sup>22</sup> Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 148.

integration of African Americans.”<sup>23</sup> This struggle on the part of maternalist reformers constituted an effort to fully develop the ADC program to benefit and care for all the nation’s children, not just the white ones.

Women reformers were not alone in their concern for the treatment of poor black children or in their desire to see them included in the ADC program. Franklin Roosevelt addressed the Social Security Act in his 1944 State of the Union address. Roosevelt called for an economic bill of rights, stating: “We cannot be content [...] if some fraction of our people – whether it be one third of one-fifth or one-tenth – is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, or insecure.”<sup>24</sup> Roosevelt further explained what economic rights all America people should have:

The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation; [...] The right of every family to a decent home; The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health; The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment; The right to a good education.<sup>25</sup>

The endorsement by President Roosevelt for an economic “bill of rights” without regard to race inspired the Bureau of Public Assistance to increase the non-white proportion of ADC recipients. Over the course of the late 1940s and 1950s, ADC became a more inclusive program. Approval and acceptance at the highest levels of ADC administration allowed for the increase of black recipients. Gwendolyn

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<sup>23</sup> Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 149.

<sup>24</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, State of the Union Address, 1944, in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, (New York, Harper and Brothers Publishing, 1950). 40-46.

<sup>25</sup> Roosevelt, State of the Union Address, 1944.

Mink explains: “African American participation in ADC increased after 1940 – to 42.2 percent of ADC families in 1958.”<sup>26</sup>

Exclusion of African American women from assistance was a pattern established early in governmental aid programs. Joanne Goodwin’s article “Mother’s Pensions, Chicago 1911-1931” illustrates this trend. Goodwin explained, “Some areas excluded African American families entirely despite the fact they represented a significant portion, 20 to 45 percent, of a county’s population.”<sup>27</sup> The increasing appearance of black women on ADC rolls did not mean the end of racism at local or state levels. According to Solinger, racism was an integral aspect of welfare assistance; as she explains, by the 1950s, many states “were instituting formal practices” designed to prevent blacks from receiving assistance.<sup>28</sup>

African American women anticipated racism at welfare offices. Solinger explains; “A study of black unmarried women receiving ADC benefits in Philadelphia in the late 1950s revealed that the unwed mothers felt that ‘telling [Welfare of their pregnancy] is a necessary evil.’”<sup>29</sup> They had to tell but preferred to avoid the condemnation and blame that would follow. Black women expected racist treatment from the welfare office in general and individual caseworkers in particular.

The acceptance of blacks on welfare rolls at the federal level led many states to enact legislation that removed them at the state level. “New recipients of

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<sup>26</sup> Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 149.

<sup>27</sup> Joanne L. Goodwin, “Mothers’ Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1931,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Families and Children*, ed. Anya Jabour, 310.

<sup>28</sup> Shaw. *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, p.51.

<sup>29</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, p. 51.

color on the rolls and occasional federal pressure on the state to continue in this direction stimulated some state programs to intensify their efforts to keep the welfare rolls as white as possible.”<sup>30</sup> The provisions of a “suitable home” and “no man in the house” reduced welfare rolls during the 1940s and 1950s. These laws targeted black families: Mimi Abramovitz explains: “The overrepresentation of black women among husbandless families and their higher rates of fertility and illegitimacy left them uniquely vulnerable to suitable home rules based upon vague and discretionary definitions of moral fitness.”<sup>31</sup>

Morality played an important role in determining a mother’s eligibility for government aid, just as it had in private assistance. Morals testing and racism were connected just as they had been in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Morals testing targeted black women. The regulation of a mother’s sexual behavior came under the “no man in the house” rule, which many states began to institute in the 1940s and 1950s. Linda Gordon explains: “the presence of a man in the house or the birth of an illegitimate child, made the home unsuitable.”<sup>32</sup> A recipient’s home could be inspected at any time, day or night, and the appearance of a man in the home or the actual presence of a man meant that the home was unsuitable according to regulations for receiving benefits.

Morality questions about recipients had occurred before the creation of government aid programs. Private reformers and charity workers had used “friendly visits” in conjunction with assistance, to monitor family life. The government program also used home checks to ensure the morality of mothers

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<sup>30</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, 90.

<sup>31</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 326.

<sup>32</sup> Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 298.

receiving aid. However, the new regulations were vastly different from the “friendly visits” from a motherly woman. Under the federal ADC program, invasive surveillance became the norm in the 1940s and 1950s:

Across the country three levels of surveillance emerged: 1) a home was watched during the day or night or both; 2) two investigators made a surprise visit with one at the front door, the other at the back door, in the hope of apprehending an errant man; or 3) the investigators demanded entry and searched the premises for a man or evidence that man might be included in the family unit ... the “surprise element” of the actual visit was considered to one of its chief merits.<sup>33</sup>

The invasive policies that allowed for home visits as part of the morals testing for ADC recipients contributed to the exclusionary nature of public assistance. As a result, a program designed to be inclusive actually excluded women based upon judgments about mothers’ morality.

Black women, who had recently begun to access the welfare system, were denied benefits based upon the arbitrary moral fitness provisions. Some states went further in their efforts to maintain the whiteness of their welfare rolls. Mississippi enacted a welfare bill in 1954 that ended aid to families where the mother maintained an “illicit” relationship. In 1954, Mississippi house bill number 944 stated:

No person shall be eligible for financial assistance to needy or dependent children where the mother gives birth to a child after being placed on the welfare rolls, unless the mother is living with her legal husband who has been declared unemployable by the state reviewing physician of the State Welfare Department.<sup>34</sup>

The state legislature of Mississippi renewed the bill in 1958, focusing on “illicit” relationships and “suitable” homes. The revised version ended assistance “until

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<sup>33</sup> Gordon, *Pitied but not Entitled*, p. 298.

<sup>34</sup> Sate of Mississippi, House Bill no. 944, 1954.

proof satisfactory to the county welfare board has been presented showing that the mother has ceased illicit relationship and is maintaining a suitable home.”<sup>35</sup> Other states with similar welfare provisions included Georgia, South Carolina and Louisiana. Some states included “substitute father clauses,” which terminated assistance if the mother had even a casual short-term relationship.<sup>36</sup> Louisiana’s 1960 bill was the most stringent attack on black families receiving ADC. The bill removed over 20,000 children from the state’s welfare rolls. Almost 95% of those removed were black.<sup>37</sup> The Louisiana bill, which had disastrous effects for poor blacks, stated that women who had an additional illegitimate child while receiving assistance would be immediately removed from the welfare rolls. The state measures designed to reduce welfare rolls, were specifically designed to target poor blacks and maintain welfare as a system for poor white women. They were successful, as public sentiment “suggested that it was acceptable to withhold federal support, or food money from illegitimate black babies.”<sup>38</sup>

Racial discrimination is often considered a southern problem because for centuries African American populations were centered in rural, southern areas. However, in the years before and after World War I, millions of African Americans migrated north in search of employment in the growing industrial centers. Historian Faustine C. Jones explains: “The demands of the war industries, coupled with the decline in European immigration created a serious labor shortage in 1915. The cities of the North could use men of brawn; it did not matter in 1915

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<sup>35</sup> Sate of Mississippi, House Bill no. 289, 1958.

<sup>36</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 325.

<sup>37</sup> Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*, 192.

<sup>38</sup> Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*, 193.



that those men were unskilled.”<sup>39</sup> To meet the demands for labor, employers looked south to the large populations of poor, black men.

While most companies seeking labor recruited black men from the rural south, black women also migrated north. Most black women moved north to work as live-in servants. Historian Elizabeth Clark-Lewis examined the migration trends of black women in her essay, “‘This Work had an End’: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940.” She explained: “Disproportionately young, female, and poorly educated, they found themselves in urban centers where the pattern of racial segregation combined with class and gender restrictions to limit the jobs available to them.”<sup>40</sup> Overwhelmingly, black, female migrants became domestic servants. Just as the black men had discovered, segregation and racism followed the women when they moved north. They found themselves restricted in the jobs they could find by racial discrimination.

Many African Americans migrated north for the lucrative jobs that paid much more than they could make in the South, but still earned lower wages than whites.<sup>41</sup> The “Great Migration,” which brought blacks North changed the population distribution so that large populations of African Americans resided in northern, urban areas. Racism followed them North, exemplified by the lower wages and housing restrictions that left black families living in rundown urban

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<sup>39</sup> Faustine C. Jones, “Black Americans and the City: A Historical Survey,” in *The Journal of Negro Education*, volume 42, number 3, Summer 1973, 261-282.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, “‘This Work Had an End’: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940,” in *Women and Power in American History: A Reader, vol. II From 1870*, eds. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1991, p. 197.

<sup>41</sup> Carole Marks, “Black Workers and the Great Migration North,” in *Phylon*, Volume 46, number 2, 1985, 148-161.

areas that formed the ghettos.<sup>42</sup> The racism that followed African Americans north was also present in the ADC administration programs.

Racism in northern cities was evident in welfare policies that excluded African Americans. In 1961, Newburgh, New York, city manager Joseph McD. Mitchell issued thirteen rules to govern welfare. Thom Blair, of the New York Amsterdam News, called the new regulations “a cancerous sore on the nation’s conscience which if not checked will spread rapidly to hundreds of Northern communities and cripple the Negro as he strides toward freedom.”<sup>43</sup> Mitchell’s thirteen rules directly affected African Americans. The regulations included a suitable home clause stating, “prior to certifying or continuing any Aid to Dependent Children causes a determination shall be made as to the home environment, If it is not satisfactory the city shall take such children and place them in foster homes in place of welfare aid to family adults.”<sup>44</sup> Aid workers also required adults to prove they had a solid job offer when they moved to the city. This regulation reflects the trends of preventing migration that occurred during the Colonial era.

Newburgh was not the only northern city to develop racially exclusive programs. Cleveland, Ohio attracted national attention when the welfare office there forced a Negro mother and her eight children out of town. “Under a court

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<sup>42</sup> Nicholas Lemann’s *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Shaped America*, (New York, A.A. Knopf 1991), Leon Litwack’s *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), and Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, (New York, Pantheon Books, 1976), are all books on the Great Migration. These works examine the transition of African Americans from slavery to sharecroppers to laborers. These scholars’ works also highlight the problems of segregation and racism that moved north as African Americans migrated.

<sup>43</sup> Thom Blair, “The Newburgh Story”, in New York Amsterdam News, July 22, 1961.

<sup>44</sup> Thom Blair, “The Newburgh Story”, in New York Amsterdam News, July 22, 1961.

ruling, the family was put on a train with instructions to return to Livingston, Ala., because the children are not eligible for relief under Ohio Law.”<sup>45</sup> The woman and her family had been living in Cleveland for four years after migrating north to find work. The reasoning for sending the family back to Alabama was given by a welfare representative who stated, “If these people are allowed to remain here [...] word will get back to the South and we will be flooded with similar families.”<sup>46</sup> The reactions to black migration and the regulations or “black codes” in the local welfare offices clearly indicate the racist nature of welfare administration as well as a reaction to the rising Civil Rights Movement.

Following Roosevelt’s state of the union address in 1944, black children became included in ADC on the federal level. However, eligibility was still determined on the state level, and many states were unwilling to allow the program to benefit nonwhites. In the late 1940s, the federal government attempted to coerce states into changing their laws with “suitable homes” and “no man in the house” regulations, which specifically targeted black mothers.<sup>47</sup> In order to combat the regulations that targeted blacks, specifically “suitable home” laws. Arthur S. Flemming, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare issued a ruling regarding the laws in 1945. Flemming’s ruling stated:

When a needy child who otherwise fits within the Aid to Dependent Children program of the State is denied the funds that are admittedly needed to provide the basic essentials of life itself, because of the behavior of his parent or other relative, the State plan imposes a condition of eligibility that bears no just relationship to the Aid to Dependent Children program. I therefore believe that this Department should inform the state agencies

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<sup>45</sup> “Cleveland Sends 9 Negroes South,” New York Times, June 9, 1957.

<sup>46</sup> “Cleveland Sends 9 Negroes South,” New York Times, June 9, 1957

<sup>47</sup> Solinger and Mink, *Welfare*, 91.

administering Aid to Dependent Children plans that eligibility conditions with the effect described are not compatible with entitlement for continued federal grants.<sup>48</sup>

Federal oversight of the ADC program allowed Secretary Flemming to issue new rules and regulations regarding the program. His office further attempted to force states into providing for children of “unsuitable homes” in other ways, but his rulings were unpopular with states and administrators who wanted to keep their rolls white.

While the battle between the states and federal government continued over the acceptance of black families on the rolls, Congress made changes to the existing ADC program. In 1950, the program expanded to include mothers within the monthly cash grant. Monthly cash grants increased to provide living expenses for mothers. Solinger explains this was “ a recognition, fifteen years after the Social Security Act became law, that mothering is work and that mothers had to eat too.”<sup>49</sup> In 1951, Congress again turned its attention to welfare policies; this time they passed the Jenner Amendment. “This policy revoked the confidentiality promise to recipients and replaced it with a promise to the states.”<sup>50</sup> The federal government would no longer withhold money from states that published their welfare rolls. Revoking the welfare recipients’ right to privacy allowed for more exclusion of women from the welfare rolls.<sup>51</sup> Poor women could be - and often were - scared away from the welfare office by threats and intimidation as well as from fear of having their plight made public.

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<sup>48</sup> Arthur S. Flemming, in “Letter to State Agencies Administering Approved Public Assistance Plans,” written by Kathryn D. Goodwin, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Solinger and Mink, *Welfare*, 145.

<sup>50</sup> Solinger and Mink, *Welfare*, 145.

<sup>51</sup> Solinger and Mink, *Welfare*, 146.

In contrast to the restrictive measure of revoking privacy rights, Congress rewrote the eligibility rules for ADC in 1954. The new rules meant that “ten million previously excluded agricultural and domestic workers could apply for aid.”<sup>52</sup> This change increased the welfare rolls steadily over the course of the 1950s. Much of the increase was black. Between 1948 and 1961, two-thirds of the increase in ADC recipients was black families. Black representation on ADC rolls climbed from 31 percent to 48 percent between 1950 and 1961.<sup>53</sup> As unemployment for blacks increased and stayed elevated, many of the new welfare recipients under the rewritten eligibility rules were African American.

Welfare eligibility expanded in the 1950s. This expansion increased the costs of the program while also increasing the number of minorities, especially blacks, who had access to the programs. As the 1950s progressed, the issue of public assistance became tied to the rising Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement pointed to inequalities in many arenas of society, including education, politics, and welfare. The attention the movement brought to the inequalities in the welfare program led to further expansion of the welfare state.

### **Civil Rights and Welfare Expansion**

Challenges to the racist status quo were implemented beginning in the 1950s. “Jim Crow”- segregation, disenfranchisement, and refusal of services to African Americans - dominated policy in many states, especially in the South. One early attack on “Jim Crow” legislation and the problems of segregation came

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<sup>52</sup> Solinger and Mink, *Welfare*, 146.

<sup>53</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 321.

with President Truman's issue of executive order 9981.<sup>54</sup> The order, issued on July 26, 1948, stated: "It is hereby declared to the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin."<sup>55</sup> World War II, with its fight against the inhumane crimes of white supremacy, brought attention to the problems of race relations in the United States. C. Vann Woodward, in his groundbreaking book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, explains: "Adolf Hitler's doctrine of the 'master race' had as its chief victim the Jew, but the association of that doctrine with the creed of white supremacy was inevitably made in the American mind."<sup>56</sup> The connection was made more poignant with the realization that African Americans had served in the military to fight the injustices in Europe but returned home to find themselves without the basic rights of American citizens. According to Woodward, "the long-range significance of the new military policy extended far beyond the limits of the armed services."<sup>57</sup>

Another major blow for civil rights and equality came with the 1954 Supreme Court decision in the case Brown vs. Board of Education. This case grew out of challenges to the segregated school system in southern states. Parents in Topeka, Kansas argued that the doctrine of 'separate but equal' that grew out of the Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, was unconstitutional. This case, which was originally argued in 1952 and then again in 1953, challenged the

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<sup>54</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1966), 131.

<sup>55</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Executive Order 9981*, July 26, 1948.

<sup>56</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1966), 131.

<sup>57</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1966), 131.

doctrine of separate but equal. The case centered on black children in the public school system in Kansas. The plaintiffs argued that “segregated public schools are not ‘equal’ and cannot be made ‘equal’ and that hence they are deprived of the equal protection of the laws.”<sup>58</sup> Chief Justice Warren delivered the opinion for the court, which stated: “To separate them [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generated a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”<sup>59</sup> The court further concluded, “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”<sup>60</sup> This court case legally ended school segregation. It also mobilized African Americans to organize and fight for equal access and rights in other areas, including housing and assistance programs.

Desegregation instigated an ongoing struggle between white supremacists and advocates of racial equality. Jill Quadagno explains: “Whites not only mobilized against school desegregation officially through legal action but also through a reign of terror that included economic coercion, violence and murder.”<sup>61</sup> However, blacks, having suffered discrimination and racial inequality for many years, were adamant in their demands and were equally willing to fight for them. Organizations sprang up to fight for the civil rights and economic equality of African Americans. These groups included the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee

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<sup>58</sup> Appellant Brief, *Brown v. Board of Education*, December 8, 1953.

<sup>59</sup> Chief Justice Warren, Opinion for the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka, 1954.

<sup>60</sup> Warren.

<sup>61</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 25.

(SNCC), and the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). The actions of African Americans in fighting for their civil rights and the national attention their actions garnered “brought to the forefront of national politics not only the brutality of racial oppression but also the instability of the New Deal compromise.”<sup>62</sup> The New Deal social welfare programs traded care for all the nation’s poor for political expediency; the Civil Rights movement called attention to this failing. Demanding equality in all public services, African Americans brought to light the inequalities in the welfare state and the problems associated with local control.

The link between Civil Rights and welfare altered public assistance programs. It made welfare more accessible but also more controversial. “By the end of the decade [of the 1950s], welfare issues had been deeply woven into the most explosive arena of political debate since the Civil War: states’ rights versus civil rights.”<sup>63</sup>

Black populations became increasingly important to the Democratic party during the 1950s and early 1960s, due largely to the great migration of African Americans out of the South, where they were effectively disenfranchised. Quadagno explains, “The black migration was not so much a general exodus from the South as a selective move out of areas where the political participation of African Americans was most limited. Thus it was also a move from no voting to voting.”<sup>64</sup> The movement of more blacks to northern cities where they were able to participate in national elections meant that the needs of African Americans could no longer be ignored in favor of political compromise. Thus, President John

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<sup>62</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 26.

<sup>63</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 147.

<sup>64</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 26.



F. Kennedy, a Democrat, had no choice but to court black voters and address their demands for political and economic equality.

In response to the mounting Civil Rights Movement, President Kennedy decided to address poverty. Many historians and social scientists question why Kennedy decided to focus on poverty in the face of the Civil Rights Movement. Some argue that his attention to poverty was a way to avoid the issue of civil rights and still maintain the support of black voters. For Quadagno, the issue of why Kennedy focused on poverty “obscures the crucial linkages that unquestionably did develop between the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement once the programs began operating.”<sup>65</sup> Kennedy’s focus on poverty could very well have been a move of political expediency, a way to maintain the black vote while not alienating the white voters. It can, however, be argued that focusing on poverty would address the demands of the Civil Rights Movement. Many blacks lived in abject poverty and were unable to access social welfare services. Additionally, economic equality was one tenet of the movement. In any case, Kennedy’s focus on poverty linked the issues of welfare rights with civil rights.

Segregation prevented African Americans from fully participating in the economic development of the United States. It further kept them from educational and economic opportunities that would allow many of them to achieve a semblance of the middle-class culture and ideals of many white Americans. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed this issue when he said, “We cannot come to

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<sup>65</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 28.

full prosperity with one great group so ill-delayed that it cannot buy goods.”<sup>66</sup>

King and his followers recognized the problem of economic disparity as part of their movement for equal rights and access. Poverty was an important issue for African Americans. Their demand for full equality included a desire for equal access to all government programs.

Kennedy’s focus on poverty took the form of a commission to study the problem and recommend action. While waiting for the results from Kennedy’s Council of Economic Advisors, the link between welfare rights and civil rights was growing. “Many state legislatures, particularly in the South, fixed their welfare policies to mesh with state efforts to resist federal civil rights mandates.”<sup>67</sup> State attempts to counter-act civil rights by denying assistance to African Americans at the state level were part of a program of economic coercion to dissuade blacks from seeking rights. As evidenced by the increase in suitable home requirements in states such as Mississippi and South Carolina, residency requirements in northern states such as Ohio, and the “black codes” instituted in Newburgh, New York, administrators and state legislatures tried to prevent civil rights through economic attacks. The National Urban League, an African American association established in 1911 to work for the interests of blacks, decried the economic reprisals that states used to stop the fight for civil rights. In her book, *Wake Up Little Susie*, Rickie Solinger quotes a 1960 Urban League memo that claimed that the Louisiana morals bill “was actually ‘an act of reprisal

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<sup>66</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “The Negro and the Constitution,” Atlanta, Ga. May 1944, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1992), 109.

<sup>67</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, 195.

or of intimidation against a Negro population which has been insistently pressing for an end to racial segregation in education and other areas of living.”<sup>68</sup> While policy makers at the federal level were seeking to increase access to the welfare system, states were instituting their own policies of racial discrimination. The federal government would have to combat the racism in order to make the ADC program fully accessible.<sup>69</sup>

Federal efforts to improve welfare services and Kennedy’s intention to focus on the problems of poverty led to the Social Security Amendments of 1962. ADC became Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which focused on serving the needs of the whole family. In promoting the new amendments and the new approach to serve the whole family, President Kennedy stated:

Merely responding with a “relief check” to complicated social or personal problems – such as ill health, faulty education, domestic discord, racial discrimination, or inadequate skills – is not likely to provide a lasting solution. Such a Check must be supplemented, or in some cases made unnecessary, by positive services and solutions, offering the total resources of the community to meet the total needs of the family to help our less fortunate citizens help themselves.<sup>70</sup>

The new focus, as outlined by President Kennedy, would use rehabilitation and education, combined with improved welfare services, to assist families in need and improve their abilities to become self-sufficient. The new amendments focused on the well being of the entire family and promised increased services in an effort to improve the AFDC program. “President Kennedy hailed the

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<sup>68</sup> Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie* p. 23.

<sup>69</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, 195.

<sup>70</sup> President John F. Kennedy, “Special Message to Congress on Public Welfare Programs,” February 1, 1962, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, 212-214.

amendments as ‘the most far reaching revision of public welfare.’”<sup>71</sup> However promising the new amendments and promises of new services were, they were not fully implemented because of a lack of funds and staff and unclear definitions of service as well as a weakness in federal incentives.<sup>72</sup> The new program was not fully funded by the federal government, and states could little afford to pay for the increased services themselves. Rather than follow the new guidelines, many states avoided action.<sup>73</sup> The new guidelines also did little to address the reasons behind poverty and unemployment. Real change had to await the findings and recommendations of Kennedy’s Council of Economic Advisors.

President Kennedy was assassinated before his Council of Economic Advisors could complete its work and make recommendations. At Kennedy’s death, Lyndon Johnson took the helm and “began steering the ship of state toward the familiar liberalism of Roosevelt’s New Deal, the liberalism of government intervention to eliminate social ills, but also toward an unknown destination as the federal government sought to end racial discrimination.”<sup>74</sup> Johnson began to take steps to end racial inequality and to address the needs of the poor; often these two goals worked together. To guide his actions, Johnson relied on the report from the Council of Economic Advisors.

In building and writing their report on the problems of poverty in the United States, the Council of Economic Advisors relied heavily upon the works of anthropologists such as Oscar Lewis. In his work, Oscar Lewis studied Latino

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<sup>71</sup> Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, 331.

<sup>72</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 332.

<sup>73</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 332.

<sup>74</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 29.

families and formulated his theory of a “culture of poverty” (also called a “lower-class culture”). The Council of Economic Advisors and the policymakers who used their report relied heavily upon Lewis’s theory of a distinct culture among poor people. According to Lewis, poverty was more than lacking money or an income. Historian James T. Patterson explains that according to Lewis, “policymakers must be sensitive to the cultural gulf that separated lower-class groups from each other and from the rest of society.”<sup>75</sup> In Lewis’s theory, lower classes lived in a separate world “whose inhabitants are isolated from the mainstream of American life and alienated from its values.”<sup>76</sup> Lewis describes the culture of poverty as “an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individual, capitalistic society.”<sup>77</sup> According to Lewis, poor people lived within a culture of self-defeating attitudes and behavior that replicated itself among the younger generation, producing “children who live in the present without expectations of the future.”<sup>78</sup> He further expands this with an explanation that in the “culture of poverty,” childhood was of little value. This led to self-defeating and behaviors: “The individual who grows up in this culture has a strong feeling of fatalism, helplessness, dependence and inferiority.”<sup>79</sup> Essentially, Lewis described the “culture of poverty” as a lack of participation in American society through an inability to interact with the middle classes. Poverty, therefore, was the poor’s own making. The attributes that

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<sup>75</sup> James T. Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty: 1900-1994*, (Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 1981, 1986, 1994), 115-116.

<sup>76</sup> Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 115.

<sup>77</sup> Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” in *Scientific American*, volume 215, number 4, October 1966.

<sup>78</sup> Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty”.

<sup>79</sup> Lewis, *The Culture of Poverty*.”

Lewis and other anthropologists gave to the poor were unflattering, yet they held appeal for the policymakers who were to shape welfare policy. Quadagno explains: “when linked to community actions, this vision of how poverty is perpetuated implied the state should become an agent of social change.”<sup>80</sup>

With the report and recommendations from the Council of Economic Advisors, Johnson set out on the primary program of his presidency, the War on Poverty. His first action for this program was the development and passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which he described in this way: “The act does not merely expand old programs or improve what is already being done. It charts a new course. It strikes at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty.”<sup>81</sup> The EOA established a new agency, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The mission of the OEO was the vague imperative: “coordinate the antipoverty effort.”<sup>82</sup> The OEO was put in the hands of Sargent Shriver. Shriver decided to run the poverty programs from his own agency, creating a new federal agency with its own resources for poor programs.<sup>83</sup> Under the leadership of Shriver, the OEO gave birth to Community Action Agencies (CAAs). The CAAs built health centers in poor neighborhoods and provided food and medical services, alcohol counseling, drug rehabilitation, and job training with literacy services and workers’ assistance.<sup>84</sup> Operating costs and money for empowering the poor came to the CAAs from the OEO, and the CAAs in turn

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<sup>80</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 36.

<sup>81</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Message to Congress on the Economic Opportunity Act 1964,” in *Welfare: A Documentary History of U.S. Policy and Politics*, Eds. Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger, (New York and London, New York University Press, 2003), 233.

<sup>82</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 34.

<sup>83</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 34.

<sup>84</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 33.

gave money to Civil Rights groups. In this way, the OEO was an instrument of change from the top, while the CAAs, organized and working in local neighborhoods, fostered grassroots movement for change.<sup>85</sup> CAAs connected social welfare to the Civil Rights Movement.

Community action groups fostered political participation among those long excluded from the process. One aspect of the CAAs was the establishment of community action boards, with members from poor neighborhoods.<sup>86</sup> However, as the Civil Rights movement progressed, community action was taken over in many cities by radical activists associated with the black liberation movement and the rising black power forces. Groups such as the Black Panther Party appealed to many young African Americans living in urban ghettos and drew widespread attention.

The Black Panther Party (BPP), a movement within the radical Black Liberation Movement, appealed to a generation of young black men and women “disillusioned with the slow progress of racial reform, the assimilationism of traditional leadership, and the massive resistance of southern white society.”<sup>87</sup> In contrast to the pacifist efforts of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the BPP “emphasized armed resistance as a primary means of achieving social change.”<sup>88</sup> The Black Panthers saw guerilla tactics as the only means of accomplishing the ultimate goal of complete

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<sup>85</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 22.

<sup>86</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 41.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Self, “To Plan Our Liberation: Black Power and the Politics of Place in Oakland, California, 1965-1977,” in *Journal of Urban History*, volume 26, number 6, September 2000, 759.

<sup>88</sup> Akinyele Omowale Umoja, “Repression Breeds Resistance: The Black Liberation Army and the Radical Legacy of the Black Panther Party,” in *New Political Science*, volume 21, Number 2, 1999.

integration and grew impatient with the marches led by more peaceful civil rights groups. Founding member Huey Newton stated: "When the people learn that it is no longer advantageous for them to resist by going into the streets in large numbers, and they see the advantage in the activities of the guerilla warfare method, they will quickly follow this example."<sup>89</sup> According to protester Robert Vernon, writing in 1969, the ideals of the BPP appealed to many blacks living in segregated ghettos. He articulated the appeal of radical civil rights held for many of the urban poor when he wrote: "The masses of poor black people in the ghettos of New York, Rochester, and other urban centers are interested first and foremost in their own cause. 'Freedom Now' has other meanings to the ghetto poor than those implicit in 'civil rights' in the narrow sense."<sup>90</sup>

Association with radical black power groups created problems for the OEO's community action program. For example, internal charges began to be leveled in Newark, New Jersey that "forty-five members of a black liberation movement (unnamed) had chartered a bus with OEO funds, held covert meetings in a motel in East Orange, and used OEO funds to incite racial violence by distributing black nationalist literature."<sup>91</sup> The forays of the federally funded CAAs into civil rights matters raised hackles among local mayors and city commissioners, whose complaints forced Johnson to retreat from the program.<sup>92</sup>

Johnson's forced retreat from the CAAs ended a program that could have improved conditions in the ghettos. The abandonment of the CAA programs was

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<sup>89</sup> Umoja, "Repression Breeds Resistance," p. 135.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Vernon, "We Need Political Power," in *The Black Ghetto*, (New York, Merit Publishers, 1969), p. 26.

<sup>91</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 50.

<sup>92</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 33-34.



meant to curb the rise of black power organizations that had strong ties to the inner cities; instead, groups like the Black Panther Party increased their power base and enjoyed more support from the urban poor. The rising dissatisfaction of the black, urban poor began to be evident as riots broke out in places like Watts, California and Brooklyn, New York.<sup>93</sup> African Americans wanted economic equality and would not change their desires due to neo-conservative attacks on the black power movement; rather, they increased their efforts to gain equal treatment.

The violence of the ghetto riots and the links of CAAs to the Black Panthers brought about criticism from neo-conservatives who wanted to maintain the status quo of segregation. Civil Rights opponents' massive attacks against black power advocates, such as Malcolm X, only generated more anger among the rising generation of black radicals. Segregationists' attempts to prevent the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (CRA) failed and the momentum to bring equality continued.

The CRA settled the issues of discrimination in voting through Title I, which states: "No person acting under color of law shall – [...] apply any standard, practice, or procedure different from the standards, practices, or procedures applied under such law or laws to other individuals within the same county, parish, or similar political subdivision who have been found by state officials to be qualified to vote."<sup>94</sup> The Act further outlawed the use of literacy tests and other "Jim Crow" style regulations that prevented blacks from voting.

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<sup>93</sup> Vernon, "We Need Political Power," p. 24-25.

<sup>94</sup> Civil Rights Law of 1964, Title I – Voting Rights.

Further provisions in the CRA outlawed the practice of segregation in public places (Title II). Additionally, the act specified the desegregation of public education in Title IV. The CRA also established a commission on civil rights to investigate complaints of violations.

With these matters resolved, at least legally, the Civil Rights Movement began to focus in earnest on the issue of economic injustice. Urban poverty became a dominating issue for the civil rights movement. Black activists sought an end to the urban ghettos; the most common form of de facto segregation in northern cities. Writing in 1970, Kenneth Clark stated: “the Negro ghetto in America is essentially a Northern urban invention.”<sup>95</sup> Clark pointed to large cities such as Washington D.C., New York, and Chicago, stating: “In every one of these cities, Negroes are compelled to live in concentrated ghettos.”<sup>96</sup> The ghetto symbolized the plight of northern blacks, who lived lives just as segregated as those of southern blacks. “The most concrete fact of the ghetto is its physical ugliness – the dirt, the filth, the neglect.”<sup>97</sup> The urban ghettos of northern cities were destructive with their extreme poverty and the rising tensions of young blacks who could find no way out. The ghetto was symbolic of the problems blacks faced when they migrated North seeking a better way of life than they could achieve in the South. They sought to move up with jobs and hopes but found themselves segregated in an unkempt, uncared for part of the city.

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<sup>95</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, “The Social Dynamics of the Ghetto,” in *Roots of Rebellion: The Evolution of Black Politics and Protest Since World War II*, edited by Richard P. Young, (New York, Evanston, and London, Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), 87.

<sup>96</sup> Clark, “The Social Dynamics of the Ghetto,” p. 89.

<sup>97</sup> Clark, “The Social Dynamics of the Ghetto,” p. 91.

The urban ghetto became a gathering place for the more radical groups involved in the civil rights movement. Blacks in the northern ghettos, particularly the young men, were unwilling to wait and work patiently for change. Robert Vernon, who lived and wrote in Harlem in 1963 and 1964, described a movement that was suspect of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Civil Rights Movement. In one essay, Vernon described a "secret breakfast" in which white millionaires pledged monetary support to King and his organizations. Vernon's response: "Freedom from the 'constraints' is not for sale. It can't be bought. It can't be sold. It can't be given in charity. It has to be fought for and won in struggle, and struggle is one thing Negroes all over are ready and eager for."<sup>98</sup> Vernon's analysis was that young black men in the ghettos were tired of poverty and unemployment and wanted to fight for justice.

The Civil Rights and Black Power movements converged in their goals. Both groups wanted total equality with whites. However, they had different ideals of how to gain their equality. For the Civil Rights activists, the methods of Martin Luther King Jr., which emphasized "justice for blacks through love for whites," were most appealing.<sup>99</sup> Malcolm X represented the other side of activism, with his ideal being "justice for blacks 'by any means necessary.'"<sup>100</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers advocated love and nonviolence; in contrast, Malcolm X, whose ideals formed the basis of the later Black Power movement, "insisted on 'an eye for an eye' as the only language that white oppressors would

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<sup>98</sup> Robert Vernon, "The Ghetto views 'integration' and 'separation,'" in *The Black Ghetto*, by Robert Vernon, (New York, Merit Publishers, 1964), 7.

<sup>99</sup> James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A dream or a Nightmare*, (Maryknoll and New York, Orbis Books, 1991), 160.

<sup>100</sup> Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, p. 160.

understand.”<sup>101</sup> The two movements both sought grass roots support to “promote black empowerment and participation at the state and national levels.”<sup>102</sup> The Civil Rights activists had gained some success, but they had not altered the urban ghettos, and this is where Black Power activists had great success in recruitment. Historian William L. Van Deburg explains: “Noting the civil rights movement lack of success in alleviating the problems of de facto segregation, many blacks saw little hope of improving their lot without altering power relationships within the existing system.”<sup>103</sup> The ideology of the Black Power movement differed from the non-violence of Civil Rights activists while still holding the same goal. Both groups would fight for total equality, but their actions were far different.

Black women belonged to both groups in the fight for Civil Rights. In her essay, “‘We Seek to Know ... in Order to Speak the Truth’: Nurturing the Seeds of Discontent – Septima P. Clark and Participatory Leadership,” historian Jacqueline A. Rouse explores the roles of women in the pacifist movement of Martin Luther King Jr..<sup>104</sup> As Rouse explains, women in the movement often worked as “bridge leaders.” A bridge leader was “a grassroots leader who moved from one rural community to another teaching literacy and citizenship, a leader with the ability to connect the needs of the people with the goals and objectives of

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<sup>101</sup> Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, p. 160.

<sup>102</sup> William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*, (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1992), 113.

<sup>103</sup> Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, p. 114.

<sup>104</sup> Ella Baker serves as an example of a “bridge leader” in the Civil Rights movement. Baker’s contributions to the CRM are explored in detail by historian Barbara Ransby in her essay “Behind the Scenes View of a Behind the Scenes Organizer: The Roots of Ella Baker’s Political Passions,” in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights – Black Power Movement* eds. Bettye Collier Thomas and V.P. Franklin, (New York, New York University Press, 2001). Baker was a pivotal member in the SCLC and SNCC. She was an important organizer for CRM leaders. As Ransby explains, “from the 1930s until her death in 1986, Ella Baker participated in over thirty organizations and campaigns ranging from the Negro cooperative movement during the Depression to the Free Angela Davis campaign in the 1970s.” (42)

a movement.”<sup>105</sup> Rouse further explains, “Women, who were capable of being formal leaders, were frequently excluded and tended to concentrate their work in areas perceived as support work.”<sup>106</sup>

For most women in the Civil Rights Movement, their work was on the sidelines; in contrast, women in the Black Power Movement were “highly visible, more outspoken, and often militant in their pursuit of black equality.”<sup>107</sup> The Black Power Movement was more attractive to many young, black men than the pacifist Civil Rights Movement; the same was true with black women. Younger women were attracted to the power movements where they were more visible. However, they also faced chauvinism within the leadership. Historian Cynthia Griggs Fleming explains: “One of the distinctive tenets of the Black Power philosophy was the belief in black male dominance.”<sup>108</sup> This ideal created difficulties between black men who believed they needed to “assume their rightful place,” and the women who were told to “step aside and stop interfering.”<sup>109</sup> African American women clearly had much to offer both movements but found themselves pushed aside in favor of male-dominated leadership.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Liberation Movement brought to light the economic disparities of the races. The late 1960s also saw the rise of the women’s movement, which grew out of women’s involvement with civil

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<sup>105</sup> Jacqueline A. Rouse, “We Seek to Know ... In Order to Speak the Truth”: Nurturing the Seeds of Discontent – Septima P. Clark and Participatory Leadership,” in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights – Black Power Movement*, eds. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, (New York and London, New York University Press, 2001), p. 96.

<sup>106</sup> Rouse, “We Need to Know...in Order to Speak the Truth,” p. 96.

<sup>107</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, “From Civil Rights to Black Power: African American Women and Nationalism,” in *Sisters in the Struggle*, p. 171.

<sup>108</sup> Cynthia Griggs Fleming, “Black Women and Black Power: The Case of Ruby Davis Smith Robinson and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,” in *Sisters in the Struggle*, p. 207.

<sup>109</sup> Cynthia Griggs Fleming, “Black Women and Black Power,” p. 207.

rights. As women participated in activities designed to increase rights for other minorities, they realized their own exclusion from full-scale political participation. Women sought to include women's rights in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, but were shut out with repeated comments from men such as Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael, who stated: "The position of women in SNCC is prone."<sup>110</sup> Women left the black movements for civil rights and began to seek their own agenda.

As women organized for their own equality, poverty was a key issue. In 1967, a survey of welfare mothers "revealed that 11 percent did not have private use of a kitchen; 24 percent lived in flats or shacks without running water; 30 percent lacked enough beds; [...] and 46 percent had not had enough money to buy milk for their children at least once within the previous six months."<sup>111</sup> Welfare rights became an important issue to women fighting for their own equality.

The first organization for the rights of welfare recipients, formed in Los Angeles in 1963, grew from a movement to protest late night raids by welfare officials into an advocacy group to help mothers win welfare rights.<sup>112</sup> The group, Aid to Needy Children Mothers' Organization (ANCMO) was founded by Johnnie Tillman, who later emerged as the leader and founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) in 1965.<sup>113</sup> Johnnie Tillman and the NWRO would fight to return dignity to women forced to endure the endless

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<sup>110</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, (New York, Penguin Books, 2000), p. 109.

<sup>111</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 336.

<sup>112</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* p. 336.

<sup>113</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* p. 336.

humiliation of welfare. A rising generation of women activists would give rise to the women's movement and the NWRO, seeking to overcome the male - dominated power structure and to provide relief for their poor sisters. The NWRO would link welfare rights, civil rights, and women's rights.

The years 1935-1965 saw the development and expansion of the welfare state. The expansion through civil rights activism increased throughout the late 1960s with the rise of the women's movement and the NWRO. Further, the black power movement pressured the administration on the questions of urban poverty and urban renewal.

Between 1965 and 1975 there were many challenges to the welfare administration, including court cases questioning the constitutionality of "morals bills" that targeted black women. Women's rights groups and civil rights groups fought to end the racist and sexist discrimination in welfare programs. They made advances through court cases, but every advance met with a subsequent backlash. As more rights were extended to minorities and welfare programs expanded to grant more benefits to the poor, there were protests against the system of perceived "handouts" to blacks and other minorities. The media played a crucial role in the development of welfare stereotypes in the minds of white, middle-class America. However, the years, 1965 to 1975, were a decade of successful challenges to racist and sexist policies. Welfare rights and women's rights groups prevented the government from passing further discriminatory legislation. At the same time, they were able to remove some of the racist and sexist policies from welfare regulations. The subsequent decades, 1975-1995, would bring about a

**backlash against recipients as stereotypes of welfare mothers played more often in the media. Chapter Three of this study will illustrate the conflict between recipients and politicians over welfare policies and the success grassroots groups had in overturning prejudicial policies.**



### **Chapter Three – Government and Grassroots Efforts to Reform Welfare: 1965-1975**

The Social Security Act (SSA) of 1935 built the foundation for the federal welfare state and established the U.S. government's responsibility to care for its citizens. However, the SSA did not provide care and assistance for all; rather, the act discriminated against African Americans in order to gain the southern vote. The Civil Rights Movement drew attention to racial inequalities in all aspects of life, including economic areas. Additionally, the Women's Movement challenged sexual discrimination throughout society, including the economic arena. When the Civil Rights Act (CRA) was passed in 1964, it began the equalization of all areas of American life, including welfare. Increased eligibility brought more people to welfare, and the rolls increased. The increased eligibility and rising rolls set the stage for conflicts between policymakers and recipients.

The 10-year period, 1965-1975, was a time of conflicts between the federal government and welfare recipients as each side attempted to remake the welfare system. Both sides wanted reforms to the welfare regulations and programs, but their views of necessary changes conflicted. This was a time of change in the welfare system; many of the alterations were brought about by the recipients themselves. Disgruntled recipients challenged welfare regulations and took the government to court to demand fair treatment. They also attacked racist and sexist policies in welfare regulations. Court challenges over welfare rights changed the welfare system. Their advances improved accessibility and highlighted the racist and sexist regulations. At the same time that recipients were winning battles against racist and sexist welfare policies, the government was

attempting to tighten regulations. Governmental attempts at reform included work requirements, a proposed freeze on funds for illegitimate births, and birth control provisions. The government failed to find any meaningful programs for poverty relief during this time, and the reforms they did attempt failed. This decade was the high point of grassroots efforts on behalf of the poor.

By 1965, the welfare system needed change; no one argued with this fact. Rolls and costs were rising, and politicians struggled to control them. The administration expressed its frustration with the welfare system legislatively, by creating laws to reduce the rolls. However, the politicians and lawmakers were not the only people seeking to change welfare. Recipients grew increasingly frustrated with rules and regulations that were strict, punitive, and constantly in flux. In the 1960s, welfare mothers began to organize in an effort to challenge strict rules and regulations, morality clauses, and the poor treatment they received at the hands of caseworkers.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1960s, welfare rights groups had developed in several states. They banded together in August of 1966 to form the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Welfare recipients now had a voice, and Americans witnessed women speaking up in public about the welfare system. They spoke about the rules and regulations. They also placed human dignity at the forefront of their arguments.

There is contradictory evidence about the origins of the NWRO. Some scholars argue that the development of a national organization stemmed from efforts of academics who studied poverty and its effects. Others point to the development of local welfare rights organizations that joined forces. The reality is

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<sup>1</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 120.

that the welfare rights movement started on both the academic level and the grassroots level. The two groups converged to form the NWRO.

The grassroots part of the NWRO grew out of welfare mother's groups that formed in the early 1960s. The first local groups began in California in 1963 as well as in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Minnesota groups spread throughout the state until they formed a single, statewide organization.<sup>2</sup> The first statewide Minnesota welfare rights group was the AFDC league, which brought together recipients to combat negative views in the media.<sup>3</sup> While welfare mothers were organizing statewide in Minnesota under the AFDC league, the Aid to Needy Children Mothers' Organization (ANCMO) in Los Angeles was protesting midnight raids.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1960s, welfare rights groups began to form across the country, including in Ohio, New York City, Boston and Washington D.C.<sup>5</sup> African American women were drawn to the WROs as a means of fighting for their rights and highlighting issues of discrimination. Their attraction to welfare rights activism was partly due to their exclusion from the male dominated leadership of civil rights groups. In addition, the newly formed National Organization for Women (NOW) did not immediately embrace poverty as an important issue; so many poor and African American mothers joined WROs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Handley Hertz, *The Welfare Mothers Movement: A Decade of Change for Poor Women?*, (University Press of America, Inc. Washington D.C., 1981), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Hertz, *The Welfare Mothers Movement*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 336.

<sup>5</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 336.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994*, (New York and London, W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 223-224.

An important contribution in the development of a national movement for welfare rights came from sociologists and poverty policy experts Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. In 1966, they wrote a paper titled “The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty” and distributed it to women’s rights and civil rights groups. Their paper was also published in the news magazine, *The Nation*, in May of 1966, where it drew widespread attention. In the article, Piven and Cloward called for an uprising of the poor and welfare mothers in order to gain attention for their plight. They explained their strategy:

A series of welfare drives in large cities would, we believe, impel action on a new federal program to distribute income, eliminating the present public welfare system and alleviating the abject poverty which it perpetrates. Widespread campaigns to register the eligible poor for welfare aid, and to help existing recipients obtain their full benefits, would produce bureaucratic disruption in welfare agencies and fiscal disruptions would generate severe political strains, and deepen existing divisions among elements in the big-city white working class ethnic groups and the growing minority poor.<sup>7</sup>

In response to this paper, Dr. George A. Wiley established the Poverty/Rights Action Center in Washington D.C. in late 1966 and began recruiting members for his organization.<sup>8</sup> Wiley’s center would be pivotal in increasing welfare rights activities and in linking them to the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. Wiley recruited former civil rights organizers from groups such as CORE for welfare rights activism.<sup>9</sup> By bringing civil rights activists into the organization for poor people, Dr. Wiley tied the two movements together. He then

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<sup>7</sup> Richard A. Cloward and Francis Fox Piven, “The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty,” in *The Nation*, May 2, 1966, 510-517.

<sup>8</sup> Hertz, *The Welfare Mothers Movement*, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why they Succeed, How they Fail*, (New York, Pantheon Books, 1977), 276.



continued, with his organizers, to reach out to poor people in order to form a national group. The National Welfare Rights Organization grew through organizational efforts from Dr. Wiley and his troops working with grassroots movements. The first steps were to mobilize poor people, draw attention to their plight, and establish the NWRO as a group that politicians would have to deal with.<sup>10</sup> The first mass protests by the NWRO took place in June 1967, occurring simultaneously across the country, in twenty-one states in over forty cities with several thousand recipients.<sup>11</sup> The local welfare rights organizations (WROs) were connected nationally through the NWRO and began to spread the word and increase membership. The connection between civil rights and welfare rights grew as the NWRO grew to include many African American women. Journalist Joseph E. Paull explained in an article in 1967: “The new welfare rights movement is a recent organizing attempt by public assistance recipients to protect their civil rights and improve conditions in the welfare system.”<sup>12</sup>

Johnnie Tillmon an African American mother, who emerged as the NWRO president, was the founder and first president of the Los Angeles WRO. Through outreach to others, she quickly rallied other women around her. African American women were drawn to the NWRO as welfare became racialized in the media and public opinion. Black women had, historically, been portrayed as the “undeserving poor.” The negative images in the media created a sense of hostility towards African American women as lazy mothers seeking a handout. In joining

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<sup>10</sup> Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why they Succeed, How they Fail*, p. 286.

<sup>11</sup> Hertz, *The Welfare Mothers Movement*, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph E. Paull, “Receptions Aroused: The New Welfare Rights Movement,” *Social Work* 12, April 1967, 101-106.

local WROs and the NWRO, black women were standing up for their rights and demanding respect; additionally, they provided an alternative image to the nation. Deborah Gray White, in her book, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994*, explains: “In defining themselves and in meeting their needs, organized black feminists and women on welfare defined black women to the nation. [...] If ever the nation could see the variety of black womanhood, now was the time.”<sup>13</sup> The NWRO offered recipients a chance to fight for their rights and offered black women the chance to define themselves to the nation rather than allowing others to do it for them. Recipients defined themselves by speaking out in public against abuses in the welfare system. In doing so, they presented themselves as women deserving of dignity and entitled to assistance. Rickie Solinger explains: “the public now had trouble imagining the ‘traditional,’ shamed, docile, single mother as a humble supplicant receiving benefits at the discretion of local government.”<sup>14</sup>

The success of welfare groups generally and the NWRO in particular was in the education of recipients. WROs produced manuals of individual rights and welfare policy to inform their constituency. Educated welfare mothers were dangerous for local welfare offices. Rickie Solinger explains that social workers complained, “Sometimes they [recipients] can quote your procedure better than you can.”<sup>15</sup> Education equaled power for recipients, and they exercised this power in dealing with caseworkers. Solinger provides an example of this newfound power among recipients: “An African American mother in Minneapolis [...]

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<sup>13</sup> White, *Too Heavy a Load*, p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 152.

<sup>15</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 154.

described the changes she was going through this way ‘A couple of weeks ago [a group of welfare recipients] went down to the welfare department because I wanted some money for a new bed.’”<sup>16</sup> As recipients grew more informed about their rights, they demanded to be treated with dignity.

An important tactic of the welfare rights movements was legal challenges. Recipients and social welfare lawyers challenged welfare regulations in court. The court cases attacked, in particular, the morality clauses that were directly aimed at black women. The first welfare rights case, King v. Smith, originated in Selma, Alabama and reached the United States Supreme Court in 1968. This case involved Sylvester Smith, a single mother of four children, who lost her welfare benefits in 1966 because of Alabama’s “substitute father” regulation. Citing a casual, part-time relationship that Mrs. Smith maintained with Willie Williams, a married father of nine children, the county welfare board terminated her benefits. This case challenged the “substitute father” and “no man in the house” rules in welfare regulations; the court decided in favor of recipients. In the decision of the court, Chief Justice Warren stated: “The regulation is therefore invalid because it defines ‘parent’ in a manner that is inconsistent with 406(a) of the Social Security Act. [...] In denying AFDC assistance to appellees on the basis on this invalid regulation, Alabama has breached its federally imposed obligation to furnish ‘aid to families with dependent children ... with reasonable promptness to all eligible individuals.’”<sup>17</sup> This ruling effectively struck down “substitute father” regulations

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<sup>16</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 154.

<sup>17</sup> Chief Justice Warren, decision of the United States Supreme Court in *King v. Smith*, 1968.

in all states as well and reduced the ability of states to terminate aid based upon “man – in – the – house” rules.

Bolstered by the court’s decision in the case King v. Smith, the NWRO continued challenging welfare regulations through the courts. Over the course of the late 1960s and early 1970s, recipients continued to sue county welfare boards in their efforts to reform the system. In 1969, the case Thompson v. Shapiro challenged state residency requirements. Residency requirements allowed state welfare boards to deny assistance to people who had lived in an area for less than six months. In this case, the Supreme Court again decided in favor of welfare recipients and struck down residency requirements in determining welfare eligibility. In 1970, recipients were again in court, this time to challenge county justifications for terminating benefits. The decision in this case, Goldberg v. Kelly, entitled recipients to a hearing before benefits could be terminated. These two cases, decided in favor of recipients, were important successes for the NWRO and its efforts to improve the welfare system: however, not all welfare activists’ legal challenges resulted in victories.<sup>18</sup>

Two welfare rights cases, both heard in 1970, were decided against recipients. The case Dandridge v. Williams originated in Maryland. It was an attempt to overturn states’ maximum level rules. The maximum level rule allowed states to cap benefit amounts at a certain level even if the family had more children. In Dandridge v. Williams, lawyers for recipients argued that the maximum grants violated the SSA.<sup>19</sup> The court, however, disagreed. Justice

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<sup>18</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 228-229.

<sup>19</sup> Justice Stewart, Opinion of the Court, Dandridge v. Williams, 1970.





Stewart, delivering the opinion of the Court, stated: “Under the long-established meaning of the Equal Protection Clause, it is clear that the Maryland maximum grant regulation is constitutionally valid.”<sup>20</sup> This was a devastating loss for the welfare rights movement, but it was not the only one suffered in 1970. The case Wyman v. James involved Barbara James, a welfare recipient in New York, who had learned about the concept of welfare rights from a newsletter published by the NWRO.<sup>21</sup> After reading about welfare rights, James refused to allow a caseworker into her home. As a result, she lost her benefits. James challenged the welfare board’s right to terminate her case on this basis. The Supreme Court again decided against recipients. Justice Harry Blackman stated: “The home visit is not a criminal investigation, does not equate with a criminal investigation, and despite the announced fears of Mrs. James and those who would join her, is not in aid of any criminal investigation.”<sup>22</sup> The argument by welfare rights activists that the home visits violated the fourth amendment was discarded, and home visits were allowed to continue. While the legal strategy of the NWRO brought some important victories for welfare recipients, the losses in these two cases were a devastating “symbol of the collapse of their legal strategy.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite court losses, the NWRO continued its campaigns to raise awareness and educate recipients. Through press releases and leaflets handed out in welfare offices, the NWRO maintained its visibility. In 1971, the NWRO’s “Operation Nevada” began with a press release notifying welfare recipients of the

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<sup>20</sup> Justice Stewart, Opinion of the Court, Dandridge v. Williams, 1970.

<sup>21</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 360.

<sup>22</sup> Justice Harry Blackman, Opinion of the Court, Wyman v. James, January 1971.

<sup>23</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 340.



state's violation of a court order. The release explained: "Out of an October 1, 1970 court ruling, a temporary restraining order required Director Miller to give all people proposed to be cut off assistance the right to a hearing prior to such termination."<sup>24</sup> The Nevada Welfare Department was terminating recipients as a result of an audit of their rolls and a determination to reduce welfare expenditures. In court, the welfare department was restrained from terminating assistance without providing hearings, yet, according to the NWRO, county welfare boards were failing to follow the judge's orders. As explained in the press release: "The ruling set down three requirements: 1. Recipients must be given 7 days written notice. 2. The reasons why benefits are to be cut off must be clearly stated. 3. The way a person goes about requesting a fair hearing must be explained. None of the three requirements have been met by the State Welfare Department."<sup>25</sup> Calling the disregard of the judge's order a "disregard for poor people's basic rights," the NWRO informed the recipients of the court ruling so they could fight against termination.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to press releases such as the one for "Operation Nevada," the NWRO issued flyers to inform recipients of services they could request from their caseworkers. In one flyer, "Welfare May Owe You," distributed in 1972, in San Jose, California, recipients learned how to request their incomes be refigured to get their benefits increased. The flyer explained: "If you work and are also on welfare, all you have to do is ask your social worker to review your case. Tell her

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<sup>24</sup> NWRO's "Operation Nevada, Press Release, 1971, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 355.

<sup>25</sup> NWRO, "Operation Nevada." In Mink and Solinger, *Welfare* p. 355

<sup>26</sup> NWRO, "Operation Nevada." In Mink and Solinger, *Welfare* p. 355.

you want your deductions figured from the gross instead of the net income.”<sup>27</sup>

This information was not generally available to welfare recipients; however, the NWRO ensured that as many people as possible were informed.

The NWRO needed alliances with white women’s organizations to help the fight for welfare rights to move forward. However, NOW and other women’s groups did not, at first, define poverty as an important women’s issue. To garner attention and gain alliance with groups like NOW, Johnnie Tillmon, president of the NWRO, wrote an article for MS. Magazine in 1972. Tillmon’s article, “Welfare is a Women’s Issue,” placed responsibility for fighting poverty on all women, not just blacks. She called attention to the importance of the issue, stating: “For a lot of middle class women in this country, Women’s Liberation is a matter of concern. For women on welfare it’s a matter of survival.”<sup>28</sup> Tillmon attacked welfare policies and myths about poor women. She next explained why the NWRO was at the forefront of women’s liberation. “Nobody realizes more than poor women that all women should have the right to control their own reproduction [...] as far as I’m concerned, the ladies of the NWRO are the front line troops of women’s freedom. Both because we have so few illusions and because our issues are important to all women.”<sup>29</sup> According to Tillmon, poverty was an issue for all women to be concerned about.

By 1972, the National Organization for Women recognized poverty as an important issue. In testimony submitted to the Senate Finance Committee, NOW

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<sup>27</sup> “Welfare May Owe You,” Flyer of the NWRO, San Jose California, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 357.

<sup>28</sup> Johnnie Tillmon, “Welfare is a Women’s Issue,” in Ms. Magazine, Spring 1972, 111-116.

<sup>29</sup> Tillmon, “Welfare is a Women’s Issue,” in Ms. Magazine, Spring 1972, 111-116.



explained that poverty was not an issue reserved for minority women, but also affected white, formerly middle - class women. Women and children, no matter their race, could be deserted by their breadwinners and forced into a position of welfare dependency. Their statement read: “The AFDC program was founded on the premise that any woman faced with trying to support children alone is going to have a difficult time. This premise continues to be true.”<sup>30</sup> NOW called on Congress to address poverty as an issue that faced all women. Poverty was a woman’s issue, and politicians needed to shape the welfare system to meet the realities of women’s lives.

By the early 1970s, the NWRO had become a force for politicians to recognize and reckon with. Welfare recipients placed pressure on government officials with their protests and lawsuits. Welfare recipients, by making themselves seen and heard, forced the administration to listen to their complaints. As James Patterson explains: “Their presence testified again to the proliferation of pressure groups, and to the national revolution of expectations, which so often centered on getting money out of Washington.”<sup>31</sup>

The federal government was seeking solutions to poverty at the same time that welfare recipients were attacking welfare regulations. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon attempted several reforms. Their attempts at reform were popular with politicians and the public, but were challenged by recipients. Politicians conducted studies, wrote reports, and attempted to design new welfare programs during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The studies and reports tended to portray

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<sup>30</sup> “H.R. 1 and the Poverty of Women: National Organization for Women,” testimony submitted to the Senate Committee on Finance, February 11, 1972.

<sup>31</sup> Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 195.

welfare recipients in a negative light and blame individuals for their own poverty.<sup>32</sup> They also focused on African Americans as the cause of high welfare costs.

President Lyndon Johnson instituted his “War on Poverty” with the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) and the development of the Office of Economic Opportunity (EOE) in 1964. In presenting the EOA to Congress, Johnson explained: “There are millions of Americans – one-fifth of our people – who have not shared in the abundance which has been granted to most of us, and on whom the gates of opportunity have been closed. What does this poverty mean to those who endure it? [...] It means hopelessness for the young.”<sup>33</sup> In Johnson’s speech, he mentioned the problems of racial inequality in contributing to the problems of poverty in the United States. In his address he stated: “The young man or woman who grows up without a decent education, in a broken home, in a hostile environment, in ill health or in the face of racial injustice - that young man or woman is often trapped in a life of poverty.”<sup>34</sup> Having recognized the problems associated with poverty and the ways in which racial segregation perpetuated poverty, Johnson looked to address these issues with his “War on Poverty.” Combined with the Civil Rights Act, the EOA intended to initiate full participation for all Americans and to bring economic opportunity to those who had been without it.

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<sup>32</sup> Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*, 193-194.

<sup>33</sup> Lyndon Johnson, *Message to Congress on the Economic Opportunity Act, 1964*.

<sup>34</sup> Lyndon Johnson, *Message to Congress on the Economic Opportunity Act, 1964*.

The EOA's intent was to "strike at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty."<sup>35</sup> To meet this goal, the OEO oversaw the development of Community Action Agencies (CAAs), which would operate at the local level. CAAs worked with people at lowest level of society to assure them medical care, education, and necessities, such as food and clothing. As the fight for civil rights progressed, many CAAs became intertwined with "radical" civil rights movements, such as the Black Panthers, and this caused the program to lose favor with both the public and administration officials. In response, the OEO withdrew support from the program, which had empowered many poor people, especially blacks. The loss of support for the program occurred at a time when public perceptions of welfare were changing and many people began to view it as a program for black Americans instead of all Americans.

The increased eligibility and increasing numbers of black accessing the assistance programs led to the view that welfare was a program for black women. The reality was that twice as many single white women with illegitimate children received welfare than their black counterparts. "Yet in the mind of large segments of the white public, black unwed mothers were being paid, in welfare coin, to have children."<sup>36</sup> In response to the view of black domination of welfare rolls, however incorrect, more politicians pushed for stricter moral clauses. As Rickie Solinger explains: "The children in question carried only negative value for the politicians leading the attacks on welfare costs. Thus, these men had no qualms

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<sup>35</sup> Lyndon Johnson, *Message to Congress on the Passage of the Economic Opportunity Act*, 1964.

<sup>36</sup> Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*, 192.

about using black illegitimate children as pawns in their attempt to squash black 'disobedience' via morals charges."<sup>37</sup>

Public perceptions of welfare were not helped by the publication of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," in 1965. In his report, Moynihan examined African American families and neighborhoods. His primary conclusion was that black families lived in a matriarchal structure which, "because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole."<sup>38</sup> The report laid the blame for a deteriorating African American society on the actions of white America, calling the intergenerational aspects of poverty amongst families "the least vicious aspect of the world that white America has made for the Negro."<sup>39</sup> Moynihan's belief was that the family was the center of American society and the African American family structure was deteriorating, in large part, because of racial conflicts with white America. These conflicts, in his view, served to perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

Moynihan considered the family structure of African Americans to be weak and ineffectual; his report stated: "A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife."<sup>40</sup> The "reversed gender" roles that Moynihan referred to involved the infrastructure of the African American family, which centered on the mother. Additionally, Moynihan discussed the employment situation for blacks in American as part of the reversed

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<sup>37</sup> Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*, 193.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," 1965.

<sup>39</sup> Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," 1965.

<sup>40</sup> Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," 1965.

gender roles in their families. The report explained: "In 1 out of 4 Negro families where the husband is present, is an earner and someone else in the family works, the husband is not the principal earner. The comparable figure for whites is 18 percent." Furthermore, "it is clear that Negro females have established a strong position for themselves in white collar and professional employment, precisely the areas of the economy which are growing most rapidly and to which the highest prestige is accorded."<sup>41</sup> In contrast, black men worked in unskilled, manual labor jobs with low wages and little or no room for advancement. The employment situation for African Americans was the result of differing educational opportunities for black men and women, which led to women being better able to obtain and hold good jobs. This, in turn, equated with a loss of traditional male power. In Moynihan's report, he blamed the loss of male power and reversed gender roles for the increased rate of crime among young black men and the increased dependency upon welfare for African American families.<sup>42</sup>

The publication of the Moynihan report came at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and drew criticism from many civil rights leaders who found it "offensive, empirically flawed, denigrating, deflecting blame from the sources of poverty to its victims."<sup>43</sup> Yet, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which published its report in 1968, echoed the Moynihan report's conclusions.<sup>44</sup> President Johnson formed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to study race relations and obstacles facing minorities in America.

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<sup>41</sup> Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," 1965.

<sup>42</sup> Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," 1965.

<sup>43</sup> Michael B. Katz, *Improving Poor People: The Welfare State, The "Underclass," and urban schools as history*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995), 71.

<sup>44</sup> Quadagno, 124.



In its report, the Commission cited the unemployment problems of large urban areas, stating: “The high rates of unemployment and underemployment in racial ghettos are evidence, in part, that many men living in these areas are seeking, but cannot obtain, jobs which will support a family.”<sup>45</sup> According to the report, the unemployment and underemployment of large urban areas contributed to the breakdown of family structure. Consequently, the breakdown in the family structure of African Americans was blamed for the increasing welfare rolls. “From 1948 to 1962, the number of new Aid to Families with Dependent Children cases rose and fell with the nonwhite male employment rate. Since 1963, however, the number of new cases – most of them Negro children – has steadily increased even though the unemployment rate of non-white males has declined.”<sup>46</sup> The report tied employment to family stability just as Moynihan had and explained the rise of single parent household in the black community as a result of the high unemployment of black men. Thus, black women relied upon welfare services, and this caused an increase in the welfare rolls. Both the Moynihan Report and the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders reached the conclusion that “establishing male dominance in the black family was a prerequisite for social stability.”<sup>47</sup> In order to achieve this, black men must be employed in jobs that would support a family and black women must be encouraged to stay home with the children.

The reports from Moynihan and the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders appeared to confirm, for the public, the view that welfare was for

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<sup>45</sup> *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968*, p. 128.

<sup>46</sup> *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968*, p. 128.

<sup>47</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 124.

African Americans, not whites. Additionally, the commission report concluded: “our present system of public assistance contributes materially to the tensions and social disorganization that have led to civil disorders. The failures of the system alienate the taxpayers who support it, the social servants who administer it, and the poor who depend on it.”<sup>48</sup> The conclusions these two reports offered bolstered critics of the welfare system who viewed it as a program to aid black women to stay home and have more children. The reports provided critics with ammunition against the welfare system as they cried for reform.

At the same time that public perceptions were changing about welfare services, the program was undergoing alterations. Changes in the system, under the Economic Opportunity Act, included the addition of work requirements for recipients as part of the task to end poverty. Work requirements stemmed from the belief that welfare damaged the work ethic and that people would not work when a handout was available. Patterson explains that this assumption flowed from “the old belief that anyone on welfare was by definition lazy and improvident.”<sup>49</sup> This was a particularly damaging view of black women, who, conservatives believed, would stay home and continue to have illegitimate children for increased benefits.

The EOA created the job corps for young men and job training for older, married, men. While these programs provided training, they could not guarantee a job for African American men, who were often banned from joining powerful unions. To combat this practice the government banned discrimination on job

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<sup>48</sup> *Report of the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders*, 252.

<sup>49</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 174.

sites that used federal funding.<sup>50</sup> However, this did not reduce the welfare rolls as the federal government had anticipated. Federal authorities determined the next step was to add work requirements to the rules regulating assistance.

The Work Incentive program (WIN) was developed, in 1967, as part of a general addition of amendments to the SSA. The primary function of the WIN program was the development of work requirements and incentives, which would put welfare mothers to work and reduce the rolls.<sup>51</sup> In its design, WIN contradicted the original purpose of welfare, which was to enable mothers to remain at home with their children. The premise of work requirements also contrasted with the recommendations from the Moynihan report and the Commission on Civil Disorders. The new ideas regarding welfare and recipients were that these were not deserving mothers and that they should be encouraged to work.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, WIN offered, for the first time, a financial incentive to work. Previous to this amendment, money was deducted from recipients' welfare grant for every dollar they earned. The WIN program allowed recipients to keep a certain amount of earned income without losing their cash benefits.<sup>53</sup> Participation in the WIN program was not voluntary; "even mothers with young children had to participate in job training *if* day care was available."<sup>54</sup> The work requirements in the WIN program did not reduce the welfare rolls. Recipients protested being forced to work, and the funds allocated for daycare programs were minimal.

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<sup>50</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 61-62.

<sup>51</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 120-121.

<sup>52</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 174-175.

<sup>53</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare* p. 120.

<sup>54</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare* p. 120.

The SSA amendments passed in 1967 also included regulations to discourage out of wedlock births. The new regulations reinvented the idea of deserving versus undeserving poor by determining that widowed mothers and families in which the husband was unemployed were “deserving” poor. Never-married mothers and women who had additional illegitimate children while on assistance were the “undeserving.” In order to discourage illegitimate births, the new amendments proposed a freeze on federal money given to states for cases in which the mother was deserted or had illegitimate children.<sup>55</sup> “Advocates of the freeze accepted the idea that the availability of AFDC caused the ongoing rise in desertion and illegitimacy rates.”<sup>56</sup> Critics, on the other hand, viewed the freeze on funds as a punishment for children and a way to reduce benefits. Fortunately, the freeze on funds was never enacted.<sup>57</sup> However, the other amendments from 1967 reasserted the idea of “deserving” versus “undeserving” poor and confirmed the granting of aid based upon the mother’s morality.<sup>58</sup>

To combat desertion and illegitimacy, the 1967 amendments contained a provision for birth control. The birth control policy grew out of recommendations from the Governor’s Conference on Public Welfare in 1967. The statement from the conference read: “Much more effective and intensive family planning information should be made available to families on public assistance.”<sup>59</sup> Politicians wanting to curb illegitimate births encouraged the passage of birth

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<sup>55</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 337.

<sup>56</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* p. 337-338.

<sup>57</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* p. 337-338.

<sup>58</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* p. 338.

<sup>59</sup> Report from the Steering Committee of the Arden House Conference on Public Welfare (Albany, New York State Board of Social Welfare, 1967.) In Mink and Solinger, 280.

control provisions, which would allow Medicaid to pay for contraceptives.<sup>60</sup>

Birth control provisions were aimed at black women, who were also more likely than white women to be pushed into the job market. Solinger explains: “A Black mother who didn’t work was violating her natural status as a worker, pretending to fulfill a mothering role she had no feel for, and staying home to look after children whose tending would do society no good.”<sup>61</sup> According to Rickie Solinger, black children held little or no value to politicians or society.<sup>62</sup> Efforts to curb illegitimate births were part of the redefinition of a family as a mother, father and children. It was also an effort to re-stigmatize illegitimacy.<sup>63</sup> In addition to curbing out-of-wedlock births, the 1967 amendments aimed at reducing desertion rates by imposing stiff laws for the apprehension of deserting fathers and the collection of child support.<sup>64</sup>

The proposed freeze on AFDC funds, the birth control provision, and child support collection bill all constituted a new round of morals clauses. Morals clauses, whether new or old, were aimed at black women, whose sexuality concerned white male politicians. Historian Deborah Gray White explains the obsession with black women’s sexuality: “America’s constant concern with black women’s morality, chastity, and respectability flow from slavery’s legacy.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* p. 336-337.

<sup>61</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 145.

<sup>62</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 145. Solinger also explained the undesirable nature of black babies in Chapter One of her book, *Wake Up Little Susie :Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade*, (New York and London, Routledge, 1992). “Black unmarried mothers, in contrast [to white unmarried mothers], were said to offer bad value (black babies) at a high price (taxpayer supported welfare grants), to the detriment of society demographically and economically.” (29).

<sup>63</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* p. 337-338.

<sup>64</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* p. 337.

<sup>65</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Introduction, (New York and London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 10.

White overseers and owners termed slave women immoral, particularly in comparison with white women. The legacy of slavery, for black women, is a continuation of stereotypes of morality. The myth of black women's promiscuity continued.

While the NWRO was addressing poverty as a women's issue that the government needed to address, politicians were examining the welfare system and looking for ways to cut spending. Administrators were subject to public opinion, and the public was turning against the welfare system. The "Welfare Queen" image was born during the late 1960s and 1970s. Speeches from politicians arguing that welfare was not a right contributed to the "Welfare Queen" image. Governor of California Ronald Reagan provided an example of the arguments against entitlement in a 1967 speech: "There are those among us today who have established the idea that welfare is an inalienable right of the recipient. But what of the right of those who work and earn, and share the fruit of their toil to make welfare possible."<sup>66</sup> Solinger explains: "Coming out of the civil rights era, the matriarch, with the assistance of the federal government, had acquired agency, a (false or deluded) sense of her rights and entitlements: she had become the Welfare Queen."<sup>67</sup>

The election of 1968 illustrated the public's view of Johnson's War on Poverty. The programs were given failing grades and Republicans took the White House. Politicians and the public were concerned over rising rolls and costs and demonstrated their profound dissatisfaction with their votes for a new president

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<sup>66</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech given at Governor's Conference on Medicaid, September 20, 1967, in *Welfare: A Documentary History*, eds., Mink and Solinger, 301.

<sup>67</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 155.

who promised changes. Nixon promised to bring changes to the welfare system with his call, in 1969, for welfare reform.

President Richard Nixon attacked the welfare system during his campaign and challenged its effectiveness once elected. Nixon decided to transform the welfare system during his presidency; he was determined to put an end to handouts and place people in jobs. In a 1969 speech, "Welfare Reform: Shared Responsibility," Nixon called the welfare system a "social experiment [that] has left us a legacy of entrenched programs that have outlived their time or outgrown their purposes."<sup>68</sup> Nixon called his reforms a "new approach" to dealing with the issues of poverty and a complete reform of the system. He explained:

This new approach is embodied in a package of four measures: first a complete replacement of the present welfare system; second, a comprehensive new job training and placement program; third, a revamping of the Office of Economic Opportunity; and fourth, a start on the sharing of Federal tax revenues with the states.<sup>69</sup>

Nixon's major reform of the system would, he promised, get "everyone able to work off the welfare rolls and onto payrolls."<sup>70</sup> Nixon, like many conservatives, blamed the welfare system for the breakup of families and the deterioration of the work ethic; he sought to change that by putting people to work. The plan, as outlined, ignored the reality that women wanted the choice whether to work or stay home with their children as well as the fact that there were few well-paid jobs available to these women.

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<sup>68</sup> Richard Nixon, "Welfare Reform: Shared Responsibility," August 8, 1969, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p.313.

<sup>69</sup>Richard Nixon. "Welfare Reform: Shared Responsibility," August 8, 1969, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p.313.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Nixon. "Welfare Reform: Shared Responsibility," August 8, 1969, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p.313.

Nixon's plan for reforming welfare was the Family Assistance Plan (FAP) of 1970. This plan promised not only to help the current welfare families but also to include the working poor in assistance programs. The plan called for a guaranteed income for families with incentives for employment.<sup>71</sup> The FAP set a floor annual income of \$1600 for a family, of two adults and two children.<sup>72</sup> The proposal sought to enforce the patriarchal norm of society and to maintain the desired "nuclear" family. This meant that single mothers would not be included in the government's guaranteed income plan. The guaranteed income levels would equalize welfare payments in all the states, bringing the southern state levels up to higher minimum standard. The FAP also included work requirements that were similar to the WIN program; the program required able-bodied adults with children older than preschool age to accept any available work. The idea of putting people to work and cutting welfare rolls appealed to politicians and the public in 1969. However, the plan could not be fully implemented, as the money appropriated to pay for job training and childcare was inadequate.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, the FAP had problems within its design. As Quadagno explains: "The FAP also contained an internal contradiction. Not only did it promise to restore the traditional patriarchal family, it also promised to encourage women on welfare to work more."<sup>74</sup>

The NWRO met the FAP program with hostility. In 1970, members of the NWRO appeared before Congress to protest. One particular area of contention

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<sup>71</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 192.

<sup>72</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 192.

<sup>73</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 194.

<sup>74</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 125.



for recipients was the work requirements of the FAP.<sup>75</sup> In addition to protesting, the NWRO submitted a proposal for changes to the welfare system to the House Committee on Ways and Means in 1969; in it they called for a guaranteed national income of \$5500 annually for a family of four.<sup>76</sup> In addition to a guaranteed income, the NWRO called for fundamental changes to the existing welfare system. Their suggestions included:

Repeal the compulsory work provisions of the Work Incentive Program, Repeal the Federal freeze on AFDC payments, [...] The Federal Government should set standards of eligibility using financial need as the basic requirement, [...] Permit recipients access to their own case records, Provide special grants for legal services for appeals and for conduct of fair hearings, Provide for participation of WRO's in rule making, enforcement of regulations at Federal, state and local levels.<sup>77</sup>

Testimony of the NWRO demonstrated the frustration recipients felt with the morals based system of assistance; they were calling on the government to create a needs based system. Nixon's FAP alienated recipients who could be forced off the welfare rolls if seasonal work was available. The FAP also alienated southern politicians and some northern liberals, forcing Nixon to abandon the program by 1972.<sup>78</sup>

To counter the public addresses of members of the NWRO, politicians began giving speeches about the welfare system in 1971. Senator Russell Long was an outspoken opponent of welfare rights and entitlement. In Congress on

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<sup>75</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 195.

<sup>76</sup> "Proposal for a Guaranteed Income" submitted to the House Committee on Ways and Means, *Social security and Welfare Proposals*, by the National Welfare Rights Association, 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, October – November 1969, pt. 3, 1018-1022.

<sup>77</sup> "Proposal for a Guaranteed Income." submitted to the House Committee on Ways and Means, *Social security and Welfare Proposals*, by the National Welfare Rights Association, 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, October – November 1969, pt. 3, 1018-1022.

<sup>78</sup> Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, p. 133.

December 14, 1971, he called welfare a scandal and recipients immoral.<sup>79</sup> In attacking the welfare system, Long claimed that the idea of a guaranteed income damaged the work ethic and encouraged laziness.<sup>80</sup> According to Patterson, Long's prejudices against welfare were well known; he believed that welfare would cut short the supply of cheap labor. In one outburst, he stated: "I can't get anybody to iron my shirts."<sup>81</sup> Senator Long was part of the conservative effort to reduce welfare spending and put poor women to work.

Long's outrage against the welfare system and his desire to cut benefits had support from a large segment of the population. The faces of welfare protesters were black. The public, already convinced that welfare was a system for African Americans, now had the images of protesters to target with their frustration. Letters poured into congressional offices complaining about welfare protests. A typical letter received by Senator Long, Chairman of the Finance Committee, stated: "taxes are withheld from my salary – much of it going for this and other welfare handouts to many loafers, demanding undesirables, and just plain trash. The trash being those who have illegitimate children every year by different men."<sup>82</sup> The public began to demand their representatives to alter the welfare system, and politicians responded.

Despite continued protests and testimony from women's organizations, the Nixon administration continued to look for ways to transform the welfare system

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<sup>79</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 370.

<sup>80</sup> Russell B. Long, "The Welfare Mess: A Scandal of Illegitimacy and Desertion," *Congressional Record*, December 14, 1971, 1-16, in Mink and Solinger, 368.

<sup>81</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 194.

<sup>82</sup> Senate Committee on Finance, *Social Security Amendments of 1967; Hearings before the Committee on Finance, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, September 1967, 2047-52.*

into a job-training program. In his 1973 state of the union address, President Nixon stated: "The major existing program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), is as inequitable, inefficient and inadequate as ever."<sup>83</sup> Complaining of Congress's refusal to pass the major overhaul reforms that he wanted, Nixon called for reforms to "fix" the system for the immediate future. Nixon's proposals included incentives and opportunities for work and cutting direct relief services. Nixon also wanted to "seek means of encouraging the private sector to address social problems."<sup>84</sup> Nixon's call for the private sector to participate in welfare programs was an attempt to reduce federal responsibility for funding the welfare program. Nixon's proposals were never enacted, but they would be echoed in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act.

During the years, 1965-1975, no solutions to welfare were found. The administrations under Johnson and Nixon, sought to create employment opportunities. The government wanted to transform the welfare system into a job-training program rather than maintain its original intent of enabling mothers to stay home and raise their children. None of the government plans succeeded. Recipients, who wanted welfare to be needs rather than morals based, battled governmental proposals to change the system, and proposed their own changes for the system. In their public speeches about human dignity and entitlement, recipients garnered national attention. The legal strategy of the NWRO proved successful in some court cases, but they lost ground with others. Overall, welfare

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<sup>83</sup> Richard Nixon, *State of the Union Message on Human Resources*, March 1, 1973.

<sup>84</sup> Richard Nixon, *State of the Union Message on Human Resources*, March 1, 1973.

recipients were more successful in their attempts to change the system than politicians were. Their legal attacks, educational pamphlet, and protests brought the plight of the poor to the national stage and influenced change. At the same time, welfare recipients provided the public with an increasingly negative view of public assistance. Welfare mothers, particularly African American women, were attempting to define themselves for the public in ways that differed from stereotypes. However, what they accomplished was to confirm the racialized and gendered view of welfare and recipients.

During the years, 1965-1975, recipients and politicians battled over the welfare system. Neither side was completely successful in their attempts at reform. By 1974, the NWRO had lost its power. From 1975 to 1995, the government gained sole control of the welfare system. Without WROs to contend with, the administrations of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush passed new welfare reforms. The government was able to act with impunity during these years, and their reforms led to the destruction of the welfare system in 1996. Chapter Four of this study will examine the ways in which the government tightened regulations for welfare and replaced punitive measures that recipients had challenged in the previous decade. Sexist and racist portrayals of welfare recipients led to public support for more stringent welfare regulations, and the government modified the welfare system to punish recipients.

## **Chapter Four – Attacking the System: Backlash Against Welfare, 1975-1995**

External pressures from grassroots movements limited changes in the welfare system from 1965 to 1975. Politicians attempted to reform welfare due to changing public perceptions of the system. However, efforts to change welfare were protested by recipients, and welfare rights attorneys brought suits against unfair regulations. These efforts by and on behalf of recipients hindered the government's ability to transform the welfare system into a job-training program. The welfare rights movement was, however, short-lived. By 1974, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), the primary voice for recipients, had lost power and faded into the background. The disappearance of the NWRO meant that the government could attack and reform the welfare system with little or no outcry from recipients. While the years 1965 to 1975 were a high point of welfare activism and power for recipients, by 1975 the government could act with impunity in enacting reforms. From 1975 to 1995, the federal government attacked the welfare system, transforming it from an entitlement to a punitive, job-training program. During these years, images of welfare recipients became increasingly negative, and poverty was once again blamed on poor values. While 1965 to 1975 represented an era of successful challenges to racist and sexist policies, 1975 to 1995 was an era of backlash in the welfare system. Both conservative and liberal presidential administrations sought reforms for welfare. During these years, the government again instituted gendered and racial policies under the guise of fiscal responsibility. Politicians also successfully used class conflict as a means of gaining support for restrictive welfare regulations by

blaming welfare recipients for the middle class tax burden. This 20-year period represents the buildup to the ultimate reform of the system in 1996.

In his State of the Union Message in 1973, President Richard Nixon complained that the welfare system was a disaster that perpetuated poverty. Disappointed in Congress's failure to enact his Family Assistance Plan, Nixon criticized the current system and called on private companies to alleviate poverty in the United States. As he stated: "The real miracles in raising millions out of poverty [...] have been performed by the free-enterprise economy, not by Government anti-poverty programs."<sup>1</sup> In this speech, Nixon called for the private sector to correct the social problems associated with poverty. Nixon wanted to restrict access to welfare benefit for all but the most needy and then use private business to provide other programs for social problems. He called for dramatic changes to the way in which welfare programs were administered. However, the course of the 1970s would see other politicians and presidents making drastic changes and calling for different approaches.

The election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 meant a new approach for dealing with poverty and welfare. Carter proposed a larger, more centralized, and more expensive system. On August 6, 1977, Carter held a news conference to promote his plan for reinventing the welfare system. In his speech, he stated: "I am today asking Congress to totally scrap our existing welfare system and to replace it with a Program for Better Jobs and Income, which will provide job opportunities for those able to work and a simplified cash assistance program for those who are

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<sup>1</sup> Richard M. Nixon, *State of the Union Message on Human Resources*, March 1, 1973, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare* p. 394.

unable to work due to disability, age, or family circumstances.”<sup>2</sup> Carter clearly defined the problems with the current system, stating: “The complexity of current programs and regulations tends to waste, fraud, red tape and errors.”<sup>3</sup> Carter’s call for a new system was the recognition that the current welfare program was not working. Additionally, while he placed jobs at the heart of his reform, Carter recognized the right and need of mothers to be able to stay home with their children and allowed for this by including family situation as a reason for not working.

Carter’s plans for the welfare system were idealistic and required change on a grand scale. His proposals attempted to appease both conservatives and liberals. To gain conservative support, his plans included a massive jobs program, which would give those able to work newly created public service jobs. Appeasement for liberals came in the form of guidelines that excused women with children under the age of fourteen from work requirements.<sup>4</sup> These proposals met the same opposition that Nixon’s FAP faced, as many people “believed that modest changes were politically more realistic and perhaps as beneficial as fundamental revision of a system that was far too complicated and bureaucratically entrenched to replace.”<sup>5</sup> For these reasons, Carter’s plan, proposed in 1977, was still tied up in Congress in 1979 and was ultimately rejected.

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<sup>2</sup> President Jimmy Carter, “News Conference on Welfare Reform,” August 6, 1977, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare* p. 432.

<sup>3</sup> President Jimmy Carter, “News Conference on Welfare Reform,” August 6, 1977, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare* p. 432.

<sup>4</sup> Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty* p. 205-206.

<sup>5</sup> Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 207.

Carter was defeated by Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election, ending his attempts to persuade Congress to institute his welfare plans. The election of Ronald Reagan and subsequently George Bush (I) brought about a new era in social welfare programs. The years 1980 to 1992 were a series of attacks against welfare and poor women by the conservative executive branch with support from their allies in Congress. This period was a time of changing benefits, rules, and regulations with little sympathy for the poorest in the nation.

Reagan campaigned as an anti-welfare conservative and won election based upon his manipulation of the myth of the “Welfare Queen.” Throughout both the 1976 and 1980 elections, Reagan spoke at several rallies about the “Welfare Queen” who was cheating the welfare system and driving a Cadillac. Journalist David Zucchino explains that during these rallies, “he [Reagan] drove it [image of welfare queen] deep into the public character.”<sup>6</sup> Reagan repeatedly used the image of a woman (generally black) who was cheating the system while honest, hardworking people had to pay.<sup>7</sup> The popularity of this image with the public allowed Reagan to continue using it while he promoted welfare reform bills that punished recipients. Reagan’s focus was the reduction of federal spending on social programs and work requirements for welfare recipients. Reagan’s presidency also marked the use of “family values” in welfare programs as a means of regulating the “values, behavior, and reproductive decisions of the poor.”<sup>8</sup> Reagan’s presidency also established the rebirth of anti-welfare campaigns and judgments against the poor. The belief that poverty was a result of

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<sup>6</sup> David Zucchino, *Myth of the Welfare Queen*, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1997), 64-65.

<sup>7</sup> Zucchino, *Myth of the Welfare Queen*, p. 64-65.

<sup>8</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 441.



poor moral choices enjoyed a resurgence among politicians and social commentators. This was an era of punitive welfare programs and social condemnation of the poor, particularly single mothers.

Reagan began his attacks on the welfare system immediately. As a candidate, he promised to reform the system and used the image of the “welfare queen” to prove his point. Thus, it is unsurprising that welfare reform was the subject of his first speech to Congress on the economy. As a proponent of smaller government, Reagan touted his cuts to the welfare program as a means of reducing the federal budget and governmental bureaucracies. His speech called for cuts to all welfare programs. He stated: “The Food Stamp program will be restored to its original purpose, to assist those without resources to purchase sufficient nutritional food. We will, however, save \$1.8 billion in fiscal year 1982 by removing from eligibility those who are not in real need.”<sup>9</sup> Reagan further touted the fiscal savings of reducing cash assistance and stricter work requirements.<sup>10</sup> A primary aspect of Reagan’s plan was to increase flexibility for states to set their own eligibility requirements.<sup>11</sup> This type of law was something that the NWRO had fought against in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it was a primary part of Reagan’s plan for restructuring the welfare system, and it caused many people to lose benefits. While Reagan’s plan reduced expenditures for the

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<sup>9</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery,” in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare* p. 457.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery,” in Mink and Solinger *Welfare*, p. 458

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery,” in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 458

government, it increased poverty as people lost eligibility. By 1983, over 400,000 families had lost eligibility, and an additional 300,000 had lost benefits.<sup>12</sup>

Reagan's attacks on the welfare system came in the form of his Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1981. The OBRA allowed individual states to establish a work program and to enforce participation through benefit cuts. It also changed the method of reporting resources, requiring recipients to report income on a monthly basis for benefit analysis.<sup>13</sup> OBRA made access to AFDC harder for families and did little to end poverty. In fact, James Patterson explains: "in two years OBRA increased poverty by roughly 2 percent."<sup>14</sup> Liberals who challenged Reagan's social welfare changes and budget cuts found themselves facing a tough opponent with many supporters and a singular mindset. "To him, as to many who supported him, poverty was un-American, welfare wasteful and counterproductive."<sup>15</sup>

Conservatives under Reagan sought to end welfare benefits for recipients they deemed "undeserving." Under the Reagan administration, "undeserving" meant female-headed household. However, the early 1980s saw an increase in the number of Americans living in poverty, and the new poor could not be termed "undeserving." As Patterson explains: "Most of these needy Americans were white, working-class citizens living in male-headed households."<sup>16</sup> The increasing numbers of white, working-class families living in poverty should have

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<sup>12</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 213.

<sup>13</sup> Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, Summary of Welfare Provisions, H.R. 3982, in Mink and Solinger 459.

<sup>14</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 212.

<sup>15</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 213.

<sup>16</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 215.

brought about increased welfare spending. Instead, Reagan continued to attack the welfare system.

The OBRA changes to the AFDC system, which became effective October 1, 1981, included programs allowing states to develop their own work initiatives. The new regulations also changed the \$30 and one-third rule, which had previously allowed recipients to earn income without losing benefits. The \$30 and one-third rule encouraged work by allowing recipients to keep the first \$30 they earned as well as one-third of any other earned income without seeing a decrease in their benefits. The new regulation only allowed this disregard in income calculation for four months.<sup>17</sup> Other income regulations included counting family resources that had previously been exempt. These non-exemptions included income earned by stepparents, Food Stamps, housing subsidies, advance earned income credit (EIC) tax money, and monetary gifts.<sup>18</sup> By removing these exemptions and reducing the countable day-care expenditures, OBRA made it difficult for families to survive on welfare and penalized recipients who worked. The new programs created difficulties for many single mothers. Former welfare recipient Laura Walker, who was forced onto the welfare rolls due to abandonment, recalled: "I was left there alone with my children and had to experience the welfare system and found it to be very dehumanizing."<sup>19</sup> For Walker, the system was degrading for single mothers while benefits were limited.

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<sup>17</sup> AFDC Program Changes under OBRA, From Department of Health and Human Services, Social Security Administration, *Social Register* 47, (February 5, 1982): 5648, In Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 461.

<sup>18</sup> AFDC Program Changes under OBRA, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p.461.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Walker, "If We Could, We Would Be Somewhere Else," in *For Crying Out Loud*, eds. Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn, p. 24.

During this period, available benefits were reduced as spending on means-tested social programs decreased in comparison to social insurance programs. In his book, *Poverty in America: A Handbook*, John Iceland explains that spending on social programs continually changed between 1978 and the 1990s. During these years, spending on means-tested or income specific programs was reduced while spending on social insurance programs rose. The amount of money the federal government spent on welfare programs increased but the funds were transferred from one program to another.<sup>20</sup> Iceland explains that by 1996, “24 percent of federal spending on social assistance programs was on means-tested programs, and 73 percent was on social insurance programs.”<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Reagan “pushed for the transfer of many government functions from the federal level to the states.”<sup>22</sup> Conservative domination of social welfare programs and cost cutting ventures during the Reagan administration hurt the poor.

Reagan’s White House viewed welfare as detrimental to the family ethic. Reagan and his supporters defined the family ethic in the patriarchal sense of a male breadwinner with a stay-at-home mother. Non-traditional families, including female-headed families, did not fit into the narrowly defined family structure of the Reagan administration. By cutting benefits, he sought to restore his vision of the traditional American family. To combat perceived notions of familial breakdown, Reagan established the White House Working Group on the Family,

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<sup>20</sup> John Iceland, *Poverty In America: A Handbook*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003), p. 126-127.

<sup>21</sup> John Iceland, *Poverty In America: A Handbook*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003), p. 126-128.

<sup>22</sup> John Iceland, *Poverty In America: A Handbook*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003), p. 127.

headed by Gary Bauer. This agency's findings, published in the report, "The Family: Preserving America's Future," was presented in 1986. The White House Working Group laid the blame for deterioration of the family on liberal welfare policies, stating: "The fabric of family life has been frayed by the abrasive experiments of two liberal decades." The report further chastised the Supreme Court for its decisions in welfare rights cases for failing to "enforce the moral order of the family as the basis for public assistance." The group saved its harshest criticism for welfare programs and recipients, stating: "Welfare contributes to the failure to form the family in the first place. It is the creation of family fragments, households headed by a mother dependent upon public charity."<sup>23</sup> Statements such as these provided the backbone for the Reagan administration's focus on restoration of a "traditional" family ethic as well as its work to deconstruct the welfare system.

The White House Working Group on the Family relied heavily upon welfare analyst Charles Murray in formulating its opinion and recommendations. Murray, a social policy analyst, held views of poverty that confirmed Reagan's ideas. He was anti-welfare and argued for the abolishment of the entire public assistance system. His views of welfare and recipients countered the views from sociologists Piven and Cloward in the 1960s. Where Piven and Cloward viewed welfare as necessary and the system as inadequate, Murray felt the welfare system was both unnecessary and overly generous. Murray's opinions and writings on the welfare state reflected his strong anti-welfare beliefs. In his 1984 book, *Losing*

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<sup>23</sup> White House Working Group on the Family, "The Family: Preserving America's Future" (Washington D.C. 1986.) in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 496.

*Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*, Murray contended that the welfare system increased poverty. He stated: "We tried to provide more for the poor and produced more poor instead."<sup>24</sup> Murray argued that the welfare system made poverty profitable, encouraging the poor to act irresponsibly and causing families to disintegrate.<sup>25</sup> Using Murray's arguments that welfare was the problem rather than the solution, the White House Working Group recommended changes to the program. Murray's arguments and the subsequent recommendations from the White House Working Group strongly echoed the "Culture of Poverty" theory put forth by Oscar Lewis in the 1960s. The group suggested that welfare programs should be based upon preservation of the family unit and should include programs designed to teach the "kind of value system and character traits needed for upward mobility."<sup>26</sup> Thus, in addition to a focus on family ethics, Reagan's welfare programs re-instituted blame for the victim.

Bolstered by the report from the White House Working Group on the Family and analysis from Charles Murray, the Reagan administration argued that AFDC had lost its regulatory authority over recipients.<sup>27</sup> Murray argued that this authority was lost through the court system and that the reduction in this authority led to the deterioration of the family.<sup>28</sup> In his analysis of problems associated with welfare, Murray claimed that the family was damaged by decisions of the Supreme Court that struck down unfair welfare practices. Family was narrowly

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984)

<sup>25</sup> Charles Murray, *Losing Ground*, p. 162-163.

<sup>26</sup> White House Working Group on the Family, "The Family: Preserving America's Future" (Washington D.C. 1986.) in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 496-497.

<sup>27</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 357-358.

<sup>28</sup> Murray, *Losing Ground*, p. 162-163.

defined by Murray and Reagan as a husband and wife raising children together.<sup>29</sup> Reagan and his conservatives argued that the courts robbed the welfare boards of authority and give power unfairly to recipients. This transfer of power was due to Supreme Court decisions that made single motherhood permissible and “profitable,” according to Murray and Reagan.<sup>30</sup> Thus, one aim of the Reagan administration was to restore AFDC’s regulatory role over recipients.

The OBRA of 1981 began the process of restoring regulatory control to the AFDC program by tightening eligibility requirements, lowering benefit levels, and re-introducing workfare.<sup>31</sup> These changes reduced the welfare rolls as “over 400,000 working households lost AFDC eligibility altogether.”<sup>32</sup> Work requirements replaced work incentives under OBRA. The budget for the WIN program, which encouraged work, was cut during Reagan’s presidency at the same time that work became mandatory.<sup>33</sup>

Welfare cuts and work requirements did little to help single mothers improve their lives. Mothers who wanted to attend school to improve their chances for good jobs had difficulty completing their education under the Reagan administration. Dottie Stevens, a welfare recipient during the Reagan years discussed the Workfare rules: “[Workfare] meant we would be pulled out of

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<sup>29</sup> Murray, *Losing Ground*, p. 162-163 and Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 357-358.

<sup>30</sup> Murray, *Losing Ground*, p. 162-163 and Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 357-358.

<sup>31</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 358.

<sup>32</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 358.

<sup>33</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 359.

school and mandated to take the first minimum wage job we could find.”<sup>34</sup> Diane Dujon, also a former welfare recipient, experienced the same problem. She explained: “I had to constantly fight the Welfare Department to earn my degree while continuing to receive benefits.”<sup>35</sup>

The cuts to the welfare program and the report “The Family: Preserving America’s Future” were not the only attacks on single mothers during the 1980s. Based upon a recommendation from the White House Working Group on the Family, Reagan issued his Executive Order on the Family in 1987. Executive Order number 12606 required agencies to formulate policy based upon ideals of family formation. The administration’s ideas for family formation involved the patriarchal view that a family consisted of a father, mother, and children. This definition ignored non-traditional families, including same sex partnership and single parents. Executive order 12606 also ignored a woman’s right to choices in her own life that included choice of partner and the choice to remain single. Also excluded in the family formation policies are survivors of domestic violence. These survivors seldom seek remarriage and do not want to reconcile with their children’s father. Yet, the administration patently refused to acknowledge these issues. The order from Reagan required that agencies establishing policy must ask questions such as “Does this action by government strengthen or erode the stability of the family and, particularly, the marital commitment? [...] What message does it send to young people concerning the relationship between their

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<sup>34</sup> Dottie Stevens, “Welfare Rights Organizing Saved My Life,” in *For Crying Out Loud: Women’s Poverty in the United States*, Eds. Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn, (Boston, South End Press, 1996), p. 319.

<sup>35</sup> Diane Dujon, “Out of the Frying Pan: Reflections of a Former Welfare Recipient,” in *For Crying Out Loud*, p. 10.



behavior, their personal responsibility, and the norms of our society?”<sup>36</sup> The new regulations for policy development clearly indicate Reagan’s belief that family was the foundation of civilized society. However, his definition of family was narrow and restricted to the patriarchal order with a male head of household. This narrow definition of family colored all of Reagan’s policies and reforms concerning welfare. Reagan’s beliefs regarding welfare and the family abandoned single parents, same-sex partners, and survivors of domestic violence.

Another change in the AFDC system under Reagan was the development of the Child Support Enforcement Division (CSED), which would, in theory, remove the necessity of welfare for single parents. The new program for child support collection included paternity tests before collection of money from a non-custodial parent. It also promised to make child support payments binding after paternity was established.<sup>37</sup> Participation in child support collection and paternity establishment were mandatory for women receiving benefits, and failure to comply could cause a woman to lose welfare benefits. This action raises the questions of the right to privacy. Is privacy a class privilege? According to this measure, it is. This is an obvious violation of privacy rights for the poor.

The bill that created the CSED, known as the Family Support Act (FSA), also included another work program for AFDC recipients. Title II of H.R. 1720 required states “to establish a job opportunities and basic skills training program (Program) which helps needy families with children obtain the education, training, and employment that will help them avoid long-term welfare

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<sup>36</sup> Executive Order #12606, “Executive Order on the Family,” September 2, 1987.

<sup>37</sup> The Family Support Act of 1988, From Official Summary of H.R. 1720, 100<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, 1988, H. Report 100-998, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare* p. 523-532.

dependency.”<sup>38</sup> On signing the bill, Reagan commented: “The Family Support Act focuses on two primary areas in which individuals must assume this responsibility. First, the legislation improves our system for securing support from absent parents. Second, it creates a new emphasis on the importance of work for individuals in the welfare system.”<sup>39</sup> While Reagan’s comments centered on the benefits of this new program for the two-parent welfare family and the importance of the breadwinner maintaining the “habits, skills, and pride achieved through work” he called upon states to teach single parent families “that there is an alternative to a life on welfare.”<sup>40</sup> The message was clear; two-parent families could keep a parent at home, but single-parent families could not.

The Reagan years reduced welfare spending, tightened eligibility requirements, and re-instituted work requirements for single mother recipients. His focus on a narrowly defined version of family values left many parents out of important welfare programs and punished single mothers and their children. Reagan reduced spending for social programs while simultaneously increasing spending on the military. His programs also aided the upper income families to the detriment of low-income Americans. In her book, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, Mimi Abramovitz called Reagan’s AFDC programs “a redistribution [of] income upwards and [a] cheapening [of] the cost of labor.”<sup>41</sup> The welfare system as a whole and single mothers in particular suffered during the Reagan years. The

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<sup>38</sup> The Family Support Act of 1988, From Official Summary of H.R. 1720, 100<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, 1988, H. Report 100-998, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare* p. 523-532.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald Reagan “Remarks on Signing the Family Support Act of 1988,” October 13, 1988, From *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan*, Book 2, 1988-1989 (Washington D.C. Government Printing Office, 1991) in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 533-534.

<sup>40</sup> Reagan, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 533-534.

<sup>41</sup> Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, p. 361.

1988 election of George H.W. Bush, Reagan's vice-president, brought no new changes to the welfare system. Bush (I) maintained the programs that Reagan began as the nation's focus moved away from domestic issues to international relations. Welfare recipients would find no relief from Bush (I); therefore, it is unsurprising that the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 brought hope for positive changes in the welfare system.

Twelve years of conservative attacks on the welfare system dampened the spirits of liberals, recipients, and advocates for welfare. Political changes to the welfare system increasingly targeted the poor. Changes to the welfare system during these twelve years under Reagan and Bush (I) consistently focused on a narrowly defined "traditional family," which ignored the realities of family life in the United States. However, attacks on the welfare system in general and recipients in particular enjoyed a surge of popularity with the public. Media portrayals of welfare and recipients aided politicians' attacks by providing negative views of recipients.

During the 1970s and 1980s, portrayals of the welfare system were disproportionately stories of black women. In his article, "Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media," political scientist Martin Gilens explores the relationship between public perceptions of poverty and media portrayals. Gilens examined stories of poverty in national news magazines and discovered that; "Overall, African Americans made up 62 percent of the poor people pictured in these stories, over twice their true

proportion of 29 percent.”<sup>42</sup> He further explained that readers of these stories are likely to believe that the majority of the poor are black.<sup>43</sup> The “Welfare Queen” was a primary influence in the negative view of welfare during this time. In stories on poverty, she was the African American mother pictured and was the cause of rising welfare costs. The “Welfare Queen” as portrayed in the news and by politicians lived on the backs of the middle class and was taking advantage of an overly generous system. Rickie Solinger explains: “It simply made sense to more than 80 percent of Americans that the Welfare Queen was cheating because she could get away with it in ‘a chaotic do-it-yourself system’ that was ‘cheating the whole nation.’”<sup>44</sup> The Welfare Queen became iconic in discussions of welfare and more than likely she was portrayed as black.

According to authors Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, during the 1980s and 1990s, the welfare mother was blamed for every ill society faced. Her comparison to middle class and celebrity mothers made her appear worse. In their book, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined All Women*, Douglas and Michaels examine the standards placed upon all women and explain how the idealized notions of motherhood contributed to the chastisement of poor women. In their book, they explain the condemnation of the welfare mother: “Whatever ailed America – drugs, crime, loss of productivity – was supposedly her fault. [...] She was depicted as bringing her kids into the realm of market values, as putting a price on their heads, by

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<sup>42</sup> Martin Gilens, “Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 60, number 4, Winter, 1996, 515-541.p.521 footnote 9.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Gilens, “Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 60, number 4, Winter, 1996, 515-541.p.521 footnote 9

<sup>44</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 165.

allegedly calculating how much each additional child was worth and then getting pregnant to cash in on them.”<sup>45</sup>

The vilification of the welfare mother in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with another image of motherhood. The ideal mother was portrayed to the public by celebrity women. The battle over motherhood played in the media with stories on good mothering as exemplified by celebrities such as Kathy Lee Gifford and stories on poor mothers “who were depicted as just the opposite of determined and enterprising.”<sup>46</sup> The welfare mother, often portrayed as black, was vilified in the media as a woman who violated the principles of womanhood and mothering. Motherhood became a primary media and social issue and the comparison to celebrity mothers worsened the image of welfare mothers.

Black women were a convenient scapegoat for the wrongs in society. As most media images of welfare were of black women, the stereotypes remained in the minds of the public. “African American mothers and other women of color became the scapegoats onto whom white culture projected their fears about mothers ‘abandoning’ the home, losing their ‘maternal instinct,’ and neglecting their kids.”<sup>47</sup>

Welfare, a complex government program, became the scapegoat for increased taxes, and government spending was personified as the welfare

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<sup>45</sup> Susan J Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined All Women*, (New York, Free Press, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> Susan J Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined All Women*, (New York, Free Press, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> Susan J Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined All Women*, (New York, Free Press, 2004), p. 176.

mother.<sup>48</sup> When Clinton entered office, he had his own vision of welfare and necessary changes in the welfare system. However, the election of a Republican majority to Congress in 1994 would ensure that he would not get all that he wanted. Many welfare advocates and women scholars were optimistic at Clinton's election, hopeful that poor women would get relief from the punitive measures Reagan imposed. However, their hopes would not be realized. Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger, in their book *Welfare: A Documentary History*, point out, "It was Clinton's election in 1992 that began the end of welfare."<sup>49</sup>

By the time Clinton was elected in 1992, welfare reform was an important political issue. In 1991, Wisconsin Governor Tommy G. Thompson began a program designed to reduce welfare spending and punish single mothers, particularly teen mothers. The controversial program, called "Learnfare," reduced welfare checks for teen mothers who failed to return to school.<sup>50</sup> Journalist Ronald Brownstein explained: "With increasing aggressiveness, states, cities and Washington are trying to craft programs that encourage people to do the right thing in their own lives – at least how the government defines it."<sup>51</sup> Thompson further proposed a "bridefare" program, which encouraged marriage for welfare recipients, promising a monetary incentive.<sup>52</sup> "Bridefare" was originally enacted as part of the program changes instituted for teen-age mothers and later expanded.

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<sup>48</sup> Susan J Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined All Women*, (New York, Free Press, 2004), p. 176.

<sup>49</sup> Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 535.

<sup>50</sup> Ronald Brownstein, "Tough Love Comes to Politics," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1991.

<sup>51</sup> Ronald Brownstein, "Tough Love Comes to Politics," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1991.

<sup>52</sup> Brownstein, "Tough Love Comes to Politics," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1991.

Susan James and Beth Harris, in their essay “Gimme Shelter: Battering and Poverty,” explain the theory behind the “bridefare” initiatives; “There’s an assumption that women on welfare resist relationships, hence the need to encourage marriage. Ostensibly, marriage will tame a woman and provide her with economic security.”<sup>53</sup> Thompson’s programs enjoyed support from men such as Robert Rector, president of the conservative, faith-based group Heritage Foundation. Several states watched Wisconsin closely. The flexibility states had in developing their own programs allowed Wisconsin’s punitive measures to continue and some states began to emulate Thompson’s programs. The era of permanent welfare reform, rather than welfare changes, had begun.

Welfare was a top priority for the Clinton administration. Plans began immediately for a massive reform of the system. By 1994, the House Committee on Ways and Means was holding hearings on the administration’s Work and Responsibility Act (WRA). The WRA was designed to push welfare mothers into the work force or “workfare” programs, which placed recipients into unpaid jobs in exchange for cash assistance. The WRA also included measures designed to reduce illegitimacy and improve child support collection.<sup>54</sup> Clinton’s Secretary of Health and Human Performance, Donna Shalala, presented the plan to the committee. In her statement on the Work and Responsibility Act, Shalala explained: “Under the President’s welfare reform plan, welfare will be about a

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<sup>53</sup> Susan James and Beth Harris, “Gimme Shelter: Battering and Poverty,” in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, p. 63.

<sup>54</sup> Hearings on the Work and Responsibility Act, 1994, House Ways and Means Committee, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, July 14, 1994. In Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 578

paycheck, not a welfare check.”<sup>55</sup> The WRA, through the promotion of work, emphasized paid labor and used the “work ethic” theory of self-worth in its design. The idea of pushing welfare mothers into the work force was not new to Clinton’s administration; it reflected many previous politicians’ goals for reforming the welfare system. This program also placed little value on poor mothers’ care-giving. The new program, as outlined by Shalala, included the administration’s plans to replace AFDC with a transitional program. The WRA would provide temporary assistance while pushing recipients to find paid employment. The intention of the program was to move people, especially single mothers, from welfare to work.<sup>56</sup> These hearings were the first step in securing Clinton’s welfare reform package.

As Clinton progressed on his plans for reforming the welfare system, his administration received a devastating defeat in the form of the 1994 Congressional elections, which gave Republicans a majority. The Republican “Contract with America” promised to reduce budgetary spending and create meaningful reforms in all areas of government.<sup>57</sup> Item number three on the “Contract with America” was the Personal Responsibility Act (PRA), which focused on reducing illegitimate births and reducing welfare spending.<sup>58</sup> The proposals of the “Contract With America” centered on the conservative view of “traditional family values,” which assumes that single parent families were

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<sup>55</sup> Hearings on the Work and Responsibility Act, 1994, House Ways and Means Committee, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, July 14, 1994. In Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 578.

<sup>56</sup> Hearings on the Work and Responsibility Act, 1994, House Ways and Means Committee, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, July 14, 1994. In Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 578.

<sup>57</sup> The Contract with America, 1994.

<sup>58</sup> Contract with America, 1994.



dysfunctional. The focus on reducing illegitimacy also rests on the assumption that welfare mothers continue to have children in order to increase their benefits.<sup>59</sup> Republican leaders focused on work over welfare, the reduction of government spending, and the development of programs to reduce single pregnancy and parenthood. The association of reduced government spending with welfare to work policies created the impression that welfare spending was skyrocketing. The PRA would be combined with Clinton's Work and Responsibility Act to form the welfare reform package of 1996.

From 1980 until 1995, many changes occurred in the welfare system. Governmental actions repeatedly changed rules and regulations for eligibility. The constant changes in the system reflected an overwhelming frustration with governmental spending and with the welfare system. Much of the disgust with welfare can be placed on politicians with their rhetoric about the failures of the system to end poverty. However, a large part of the outcry over governmental spending on social problems was a reaction to the racialization of welfare and the images of the media in promoting the idea that welfare benefited blacks and lazy whites. The images of black women with many children were the primary picture presented by the media in stories about welfare. Due to media coverage and speeches by politicians, the public blamed all social ills on the welfare mother. The public perceptions and media images contributed to the changes in the welfare system.

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<sup>59</sup> Mimi Abramovitz, "Dependent on the Kindness of Strangers: Issues Behind Welfare Reform," in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, p. 290.

While the media was vilifying the welfare mom and provided a racialized view of the poor in America, scholars and politicians were providing the public with similar images. Just as Moynihan and the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders decried the breakdown of the traditional black family in the 1960s, politicians in the 1980s argued for the restoration of black male patriarchy. In 1985, African American reformer, Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton from Washington D.C. called for the restoration of the “traditional black family.” In an essay printed in the *New York Times Magazine* Norton exclaimed, “The most critical danger facing female headed households is poverty. Seventy percent of black children under the age of 18 who live in female headed households are being brought up in poverty.”<sup>60</sup> Norton, like many black reformers, wanted federal action to combat the increasing problems on life in ghettos.<sup>61</sup> While Norton was echoing previous reports and articles that blamed the breakdown of the black family on the unemployment of black men, it was ironic for a woman to call for the reestablishment of a patriarchal societal model. Norton’s analysis focused on the promotion of family values and stability as the answer to poverty and the problems associated with urban ghettos. Calling for the restoration of a “traditional black family,” Norton claimed: “The evidence suggests that most slaves grew up in two-parent families reinforced by ties to large extended families.”<sup>62</sup> Norton’s essay suggested that the single parent black family was a new phenomenon, dating to the 1960s. While Norton does not provide references

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<sup>60</sup> Eleanor Homes Norton, “Restoring the Traditional Black Family,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 1985.

<sup>61</sup> Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 218.

<sup>62</sup> Eleanor Homes Norton, “Restoring the Traditional Black Family,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 1985.

to the evidence she cites, it is probable that she is using the work of notable scholars Herbert Gutman and John Blassingame.<sup>63</sup> The call for a restoration of black patriarchal authority was without basis, as Moynihan had, in the 1960s, explained that black families were traditionally mother – headed. Additionally, the call for an establishment of male authority countered the advances made by the women’s movement in previous decades. However, Norton looked for an answer to the problems associated with ghetto life and called for altering the welfare system to focus on family stability, job-training, and education.<sup>64</sup> Norton also condemned Reagan’s plan as “moving to a jobs program that focuses on the most rather than the least, trainable.”<sup>65</sup> In calling for improved opportunities for the poorest in the nation, Norton valued education as the means to ending poverty, rather than jobs programs that forced women to take minimum wage jobs.

While women like Norton were arguing for education as a means to ending poverty, politicians and the public still viewed welfare mothers as causing the breakdown in “traditional family values.” The key argument against welfare in the 1980s was the theory of the developing American “underclass.” The theory of an “underclass” was similar to Oscar Lewis’s “culture of poverty” theory in the

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<sup>63</sup> Deborah Gray White, in the introduction to her book, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, explores the scholarship on black families that appeared in the 1970s. White examines the scholarship of Herbert Gutman in his book, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1976) and the work of John Blassingame in his book, *The Slave Community; Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1972). In her explanation of the scholarship regarding slave male authority she states: “Those who did most of the debating were bent on de-feminizing black men, sometimes by imposing the Victorian model of domesticity and maternity on the pattern of black female slave life.” (21) These scholars were in all likelihood reacting to documents such as The Moynihan Report, which called African American families Matrifocal.

<sup>64</sup> Eleanor Homes Norton, “Restoring the Traditional Black Family,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 1985.

<sup>65</sup> Eleanor Homes Norton, “Restoring the Traditional Black Family,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 1985.

1960s. Scholars disagree on the originator of the term or theory of an “underclass,” however James Patterson credits Gunnar Myrdal with the promotion of the theory in the 1940s. While Charles Murray did not originate the term, he was an avid proponent of the theory. The theory of an underclass argued that “an American version of a lumpenproletariat (the so-called underclass), without work and without hope, existing at the margins of society could bring down the great cities, sap resources and strength from the entire society, and lacking the usual means to survive, prey upon those who possess them.”<sup>66</sup> The theory of the “underclass” received a great deal of attention in the 1980s from journalists and politicians. The fear that “black ghetto dwellers were a more or less permanent, intergenerational lower class that social policy was helpless to improve,” caught the attention of people such as Senator Edward Kennedy from Massachusetts and Mitchell Sviridoff, vice president of the Ford Foundation.<sup>67</sup> Writers and politicians carefully disassociated remarks about the underclass from discussions on the general population of poor, as the “underclass” was defined as people living in the urban ghettos.<sup>68</sup> The theory of the “underclass,” much like the “culture of poverty” promoted in the 1960s, was a thinly veiled, racially motivated attack on African American families living in poverty.

The “underclass” theory, like its predecessor, the “culture of poverty,” made specific assumptions about the poor. Both theories were an attack on poor people in general and African Americans in particular. These two theories reflected racism in their categorization of people who exemplified the

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<sup>66</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 215.

<sup>67</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 216.

<sup>68</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 217.

“underclass.” Additionally, the theories promoted classism by placing the blame for poverty on the poor. They called poverty a fault of character rather than a condition. This school of thought assumed that “these people fell into four groups: welfare mothers, ex-criminal offenders, regular heroin users, and school dropouts.”<sup>69</sup> In promoting this theory, Charles Murray gave an interview to Ken Auletta and Michael Bernick of the Washington Monthly. In this interview, Murray advocated for an end to all government social programs, saying: “You want to cut illegitimate births among poor people? I know how to do that. You want to cut unemployment among young blacks? I know how to do that. You just rip away every kind of government support there is.”<sup>70</sup> Murray’s ideas for the welfare state were radical, yet his opinions on the poor reflected public opinion that welfare was for blacks and was destructive to society.

The years 1975 to 1995 were a time of changes in the welfare system that negatively affected recipients. While the previous decade had been an era of increased programs and improved access, the 1980s and 1990s were a time of cuts. The welfare system was attacked by the public, anti-welfare scholars, and presidential administrations. Without the activism of welfare women to challenge legislative actions, the government was able to act with impunity in changing the program. These changes were detrimental to recipients and were coupled with massive budget cuts for all social programs. Rules and regulations became increasingly stringent, and many people lost benefits. At the same time, public perceptions of welfare became increasingly negative as media portrayals of

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<sup>69</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 216.

<sup>70</sup> Ken Auletta and Michael Bernick, “Saving the Underclass: Interview with Charles Murray,” *Washington Monthly* 14 (September 1985): 12. In Mink and Solinger, 468-474.

welfare presented an image of black women. Fears of an American “underclass,” however unfounded, placed the blame for the supposed deterioration of “traditional family values” on African Americans. Issues that had arisen in the 1960s, such as the “Culture of Poverty” theory and the view of welfare as a black woman’s program, were revived in the 1980s with the theory of an American “underclass” and the refocus on the urban ghetto. Poor women, particularly African Americans, became a focus for attack once again. The attacks on welfare mothers, especially women of color, highlighted the racism and sexism inherent in welfare policies and public perceptions. Additionally, politicians gained support for stricter regulations by using class conflict. Calling welfare a burden to the middle class created new conflicts between the poor and middle classes and gained support for programs that reduced welfare spending. Work programs and promises to send welfare mothers to work were repeated by Reagan and Clinton, as beliefs about government spending focused on the assumption, however incorrect, that welfare was draining the federal budget. This time period was a backlash against welfare programs as well as the forerunner to the reform of 1996. Chapter Five of this study will examine the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Opportunity Act of 1996. The chapter will provide a view of the buildup to this legislation as well as protests against the new welfare laws. Additionally, Chapter Five will illustrate grassroots efforts to challenge the new regulations of PRWORA. The ultimate reform of the welfare system, under PRWORA, increased the hardships of the poor and reinforced classist, sexist, and racist discrimination.

## **Chapter Five – Violating the Rights of the Poor: Welfare Reform, Activism and Reaction - 1996 - 2004**

In August of 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This bill followed up his campaign promise to “end welfare as we know it.” PRWORA did end welfare, as it had existed for more than sixty years; it ended the entitlement program that was designed to allow mothers to stay home with their children. The new act did not end poverty; it only removed the safety net. This chapter will examine the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and illustrate the fundamental changes in the lives of the poor that resulted from this bill. PRWORA reflects classism in that it turns motherhood into a class privilege. The new welfare legislation also reflects racism: it targets minorities who are more likely than whites to need assistance. PRWORA also exhibits sexism in the welfare system; welfare is a gendered system, and attacks on assistance programs are attacks on women. PRWORA increased the hardships of people living in poverty by removing the governmental safety net. It violated the rights of the poor and brought welfare in America full circle.

Welfare reform was a political slogan for many years. From the 1970s to the 1990s, liberals and conservatives alike called for changes to the existing system, hoping to find a way to reduce poverty in the United States. None of the previous plans worked to alleviate the suffering of the poor. Reagan’s plan, while it reduced rolls temporarily, actually hurt more people than it helped. In the presidential election of 1992, Clinton promised changes to the welfare system. Republicans based their campaigns for the House and Senate in 1994 on the same

promise. Between 1994 and 1996, both parties submitted plans for reform and held discussions across the country on the issue of welfare. Additionally, much discussion took place in academic and political circles on how to “fix” the system. In academic circles and feminist groups, opposition to reform remained strong. The Catholic charities and a group of Catholic bishops also expressed strong reservations about plans for reform. However, welfare rights groups and other advocacy organizations did not oppose the reforms. By the 1990s, few of these groups still existed, and the power of those remaining had faded. After the passage of PRWORA, new groups formed to protest the discriminatory nature of the reforms and the devastating effects they had on women. The implementation of PRWORA would become a topic of debate and advocacy between 1996 and 2004.

In 1992, anti-welfare scholar Charles Murray argued that the welfare system favored single mothers. In his condemnation of the welfare system, he stated: “The evil of the modern welfare system is not that it bribes women to have babies [...] but that it enables women to bear children without the natural social restraints and without bringing pressure on the fathers to behave responsibly.”<sup>1</sup> Murray’s answer to the problem, as he saw it, was marriage or adoption. Women who were pregnant and single should be forced either to give their babies up for adoption or to marry the father.<sup>2</sup> The way to accomplish this, according to Murray, was to “demand that government no longer help the innocent children by

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Murray, “Stop Favoring Unwed Mothers,” *New York Times*, January 16, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Murray, “Stop Favoring Unwed Mothers,” *New York Times*, January 16, 1992.



subsidizing the parents who made them victims.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, Murray advocated terminating the welfare system.

In 1994, Secretary of Health and Human Resources Donna Shalala held hearings on Clinton’s plans for welfare reform. The proposed reforms, dubbed the Work and Responsibility Act, called for job training and child care in order to move women off welfare rolls. As explained by Shalala, the new program would replace AFDC with a temporary assistance program with four components: “a personal employability plan; training, education and placement assistance to move people from welfare to work; a two-year time limit; and work requirements.”<sup>4</sup> The focus of Clinton’s welfare reform was putting welfare mothers to work. In addition to work requirements, Clinton’s plan promised childcare subsidies and stronger enforcement of child support payments. Based upon the assumption that poor, single mothers were irresponsible parents, the theme of Clinton’s proposal was “parental responsibility.” This “parental responsibility” focused on parents providing monetary support for their children, rather than relying on the government to do so. As Shalala stated: “We believe that mothers and fathers must be held responsible for the support of their children. Men and women must understand that parenthood brings serious obligations and those obligations will be enforced.”<sup>5</sup> This included; paid work by the custodial parent, financial support from the non-custodial parent, and a reduction in out-of-wedlock births.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Murray, “Stop Favoring Unwed Mothers,” *New York Times*, January 16, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Hearings on the Work and Responsibility Act, from House Committee on Ways and Means, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, July 14, 1994, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 578-586.

<sup>5</sup> Hearings on the Work and Responsibility Act, from House Committee on Ways and Means, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, July 14, 1994, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 582.

<sup>6</sup> Hearings on the Work and Responsibility Act, from House Committee on Ways and Means, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, July 14, 1994, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 578-586.

At the same time that Shalala was promoting Clinton's plan for welfare reform, the Republicans were working on their own reforms. The Republican plan, called the Personal Responsibility Act (PRA), also included work requirements and a two-year limit on assistance payments. The focus of the PRA was restoring "personal responsibility." This focused on illegitimacy, unemployment and teen-pregnancy as personal irresponsible choices that should not be rewarded. Whereas Clinton's program highlighted parental responsibility for their children, the PRA focused on personal choices as either right or wrong in regards to societal standards. The PRA targeted young parents, specifically teen-aged mothers. The plan stated: "Mothers under the age of 18 may no longer receive AFDC payments for children born out of wedlock and mothers who are ages 18,19 and 20 can be prohibited by the states from receiving AFDC payments and housing benefits."<sup>7</sup> This measure reflects sexism; young, unmarried teen-mothers received punishment but not the teen fathers. This also reflects ageism; calling choices by teen-aged girls (specifically the choice to give birth) irresponsible. The PRA would have allowed states to institute their own reform measures and regulations; it also would have given states block grants to use at the governor's discretion for welfare services.<sup>8</sup> Both plans sought to increase the collection of child support, but the PRA made the establishment of paternity a pre-requisite for receiving assistance. The Republican plan for reform contained

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<sup>7</sup> *Preview of Republican Plans to Reform Welfare, 1994*, in Mink and Solinger *Welfare*, p. 590-594.

<sup>8</sup> *Hearings on the Work and Responsibility Act*, from House Committee on Ways and Means, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, July 14, 1994, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 578-586.

stricter measures than Clinton's did, but ultimately, either reform measure would be devastating for welfare recipients.

While scholars like Charles Murray were arguing for the abolishment of the welfare system, the Clinton administration was holding hearings on proposed reforms, and the Republican party was developing its own plans, feminist scholars were arguing against changing the system. Mimi Abramovitz and Frances Fox Piven argued against welfare reform as "harassment of welfare mothers, in the name of reform."<sup>9</sup> In their criticism of proposed reforms to the system, Abramovitz and Piven pointed to different state programs that sanctioned women, stating: "poor women are supposed to become adequate providers and better parents by dint of welfare sanctions."<sup>10</sup> Sanctions are a punishment meted out by welfare departments that meant a woman would lose benefits for a period of one to three months. Failure to comply with any regulation could and often did result in a sanction. Abramovitz and Piven argued that the issue behind welfare reform was dependency rather than poverty.<sup>11</sup> As they explained: "For years, a long line of male policy wonks have been complaining that welfare 'dependency' is America's major problem."<sup>12</sup> They further explain that politicians view dependency as receiving money from the government for survival and point out the fact that welfare stipends are too low to encourage real dependency upon the

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<sup>9</sup> Mimi Abramovitz and Frances Fox Piven, "Scapegoating Women on Welfare," *New York Times*, September 2, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Mimi Abramovitz and Frances Fox Piven, "Scapegoating Women on Welfare," *New York Times*, September 2, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Mimi Abramovitz and Frances Fox Piven, "Scapegoating Women on Welfare," *New York Times*, September 2, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Mimi Abramovitz and Frances Fox Piven, "Scapegoating Women on Welfare," *New York Times*, September 2, 1993.

federal system of relief.<sup>13</sup> However, military contracts and business bailouts from the government apparently do not constitute dependency. These scholars point out that if women were given real opportunities and support - such as educational grants, adequate childcare, and job opportunities - then welfare “dependency” would be a non-issue.<sup>14</sup> According to this analysis, welfare, for women, is not about dependency; it is about survival.

The debates over welfare reform continued as plans were debated across the country. The arguments for and against reforming the system occurred in academic settings as well as political ones. The debate also entered the halls of justice as the Supreme Court was called upon to decide on the important matter of residency requirements. The one voice missing from the welfare debate was the most important: the voice of welfare recipients themselves.

The debate over welfare reform included court cases such as Anderson v. Green. This case, heard by the Supreme Court in 1995, challenged the new residency requirements of the state of California. In this case, Debbie Venturella moved from Oklahoma to California to escape her abusive husband. While living with family members in California, she applied for AFDC. Rather than receiving the California level of benefits, she was granted the lower Oklahoma level.<sup>15</sup> California’s residency requirements were part of their state welfare reform plan, which was imposed prior to national welfare reform and as a means of avoiding

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<sup>13</sup> Mimi Abramovitz and Frances Fox Piven, “Scapegoating Women on Welfare,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Mimi Abramovitz and Frances Fox Piven, “Scapegoating Women on Welfare,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Martha E. Davis and Susan J. Kraham, “Beaten, then Robbed,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1995.

federal restrictions.<sup>16</sup> In this case, the Supreme Court heard arguments about exempting domestic violence victims from welfare reform packages. The court did not allow a full exemption, but the case did secure a provision for survivors of domestic violence to be exempted from some of the stricter aspects of the reform bill.<sup>17</sup> Women's groups, particularly NOW, worked on this case in order to bring national attention to issues of domestic violence and welfare reform. They voiced strong opposition to programs that would further victimize survivors. This case was an important victory for feminist groups in the era of welfare reform.

Academic and national organizations, both male and female, also argued against welfare reform. "In spring 1995, the *Women's Initiative Network* newsletter, published by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), warned that welfare reform was a testing ground for changes in entitlement programs that 'would be a disaster for mid-life and older women.'"<sup>18</sup> In calling for protests to cuts in social programs the AARP pointed to stereotypes against seniors that called the elderly "'greedy geezers' who do not need government aid or 'undeserving' people who use public benefits instead of saving for their old age" and noted that these images were "not unlike the myths used to demonize welfare mothers."<sup>19</sup> The AARP warned that the elderly would be the next target in budget cuts if they allowed current trends to continue.

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<sup>16</sup> Martha E. Davis and Susan J. Kraham, "Beaten, then Robbed," *New York Times*, January 13, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Martha E. Davis and Susan J. Kraham, "Beaten, then Robbed," *New York Times*, January 13, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Abramovitz, *Under Attack, Fighting Back*, 136.

<sup>19</sup> Abramovitz, *Under Attack, Fighting Back*, 136.

In 1995, the Organization of American Historians gathered the Women's Committee of One Hundred. This group consisted of feminist scholars, welfare experts, advocates, and activists. Together they wrote the "Women's Pledge on Welfare Reform: Eliminating Poverty for Women and Their Children," which argued against punitive welfare reform measures.<sup>20</sup> In their statement, the Committee asserted: "Women who receive welfare benefits have the same rights as all women and have the same goals for their families. We cannot allow their rights to be curtailed because they are poor nor their values impugned because they need help to support their families."<sup>21</sup> In their pledge, these women decried the devaluation of women's work in the home and condemned discrimination against women in the workplace. They also criticized efforts to turn welfare into a punitive system that hurt women.<sup>22</sup> The statement from the Committee contained recommendations for improving welfare that included stricter measures of child support collection and health care coverage and educational opportunities for recipients.<sup>23</sup>

Labor, professional, and other women's groups joined with the Committee to run a full-page ad in *The New York Times* in August of 1995. The ad explained "Why Every Woman in America Should Beware of Welfare Cuts."<sup>24</sup> The ad

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<sup>20</sup> Women's Committee of One Hundred, "Women's Pledge on Welfare Reform: Eliminating Poverty for Women and Their Children," Spring 1995, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 633-635.

<sup>21</sup> Women's Committee of One Hundred, "Women's Pledge on Welfare Reform: Eliminating Poverty for Women and Their Children," Spring 1995, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 633-635.

<sup>22</sup> Women's Committee of One Hundred, "Women's Pledge on Welfare Reform: Eliminating Poverty for Women and Their Children," Spring 1995, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 633-635.

<sup>23</sup> Women's Committee of One Hundred, "Women's Pledge on Welfare Reform: Eliminating Poverty for Women and Their Children," Spring 1995, in Mink and Solinger, *Welfare*, p. 633-635.

<sup>24</sup> Abramovitz, *Under Attack, Fighting Back*, 136.

further declared: “A War Against Poor Women Is a War Against All Women!”<sup>25</sup>

As women and women’s supporters, these groups understood the complexities of women’s lives and issued these statements as not only an argument against punishing poor women, but also a measure of solidarity and understanding for their needs. Many diverse groups joined forces to protest welfare reform, including labor unions, the elderly, feminist organizations, liberal politicians, religious groups and academics. The culmination of so many different voices joined together on one issue demonstrated the importance of the welfare reform debate nationwide.

Included in the groups protesting welfare reform was the Catholic Church. In September 1995, a group of Catholic bishops and members of Catholic charities visited Washington to speak against the proposed reforms. In their complaints against welfare reform, they explained that: “none but the federal government has the existing resources to maintain existing welfare programs.”<sup>26</sup> The groups speaking on behalf of the Catholic Church represented the fear of private charities that they would be required to provide more relief than they could afford if welfare reform trends continued. By cutting services, the government would put the poor into the hands of religious groups that could little afford to provide the extensive services that would be needed.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, senator from New York, was highly critical of the developing welfare reform plans, which he termed a “monstrous political

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<sup>25</sup> Abramovitz, *Under Attack, Fighting Back*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> “Welfare: Moynihan’s Counsel of Despair,” editorial, *First Things*, volume 61, March 1996.

deception.”<sup>27</sup> In a speech delivered September 16, 1995, Moynihan argued against welfare reform because it would repeal Title IV A of the Social Security Act of 1935, the section that centers on dependent children.<sup>28</sup> He further chastised the Clinton administration, saying: “if this administration wishes to go down in history as one that abandoned, eagerly abandoned, the national commitment to dependent children, so be it. I would not want to be associated with such as enterprise, and I shall not be.”<sup>29</sup> Moynihan also decried the lack of advocates and protestors when the bill was being argued. “Why do we not see the endless parade of petitioners as when health care reform was before us in the last congress, the pretend citizen groups, the real citizen groups? None are here.”<sup>30</sup> Welfare rights groups had long since lost power and failed to protest the debates or passage of PRWORA. Except for feminist scholars, supporters of women, and a group of Catholic bishops, there was little outcry before passage of the bill.

The arguments against welfare reform were limited to higher circles but lacked voice from those affected. Protesters were unable to sway Congress or Clinton. In the end, the plans of Republicans and Clinton’s administration were combined to form the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996. The act was signed into law by Bill Clinton in August of 1996 and welfare, as it had existed for more than sixty years, was at an end. The new program, renamed Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), instituted time limits for how long someone could receive cash

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<sup>27</sup> “Welfare: Moynihan’s Counsel of Despair,” editorial, *First Things*, volume 61, March 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Speech on Welfare Reform,” Delivered September 16, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Speech on Welfare Reform,” Delivered September 16, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Speech on Welfare Reform,” Delivered September 16, 1995.



assistance.<sup>31</sup> This act ushered in a new era of welfare, under which women were no longer entitled to remain home with their children. New limits, harsher regulations, and stricter rules were instituted, and women suffered as a result.

### **Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, 1996**

When writing the PRWORA, Congress included a preface of important findings. The findings included: “(1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. (2) Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children.”<sup>32</sup> These findings indicated the focus of welfare reform: to prevent and end single motherhood. The findings listed confirm the earlier efforts of welfare reform under the Reagan administration: that the patriarchal family is the only accepted form of family relations. Ignoring the abundance of non-traditional families, Congress and the administration focused on a narrow ideal of family that had dominated welfare and reform efforts for several decades. This effort was further emphasized by the statement: “The negative consequences of an out-of-wedlock birth on the mother, the child, the family, and society are well documented.” Congress followed this statement with a listing of the supposed consequences of single parenting, including low-test scores, an increased likelihood of divorce when grown, and increased risk for child abuse. These statements constituted, to Congress, a national crisis in need of immediate attention. The Act stated: “it is the sense of the Congress that prevention of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and reduction in out-of-wedlock birth are

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<sup>31</sup> *Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996*, H.R. 3734.

<sup>32</sup> *Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996*, H.R. 3734.

very important Government interests.”<sup>33</sup> Having determined that single motherhood was a national crisis, Congress set about reforming the welfare system to punish single mothers.

The first thing that PRWORA did was to increase the ability of states to make their own reform plans by allotting block grants. The block grants replaced the old system of grants for specific purposes and instead allowed states to use the block grant at the discretion of their governors for whichever programs they felt important. The block grants carried four stipulations for that state’s programs:

(1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; (2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.<sup>34</sup>

The first provision was contradictory to the plan’s goal of reducing the welfare rolls. However, stipulations two through four focused on family issues such as family formation, indicating again that marriage was the primary goal of welfare reform. Social critic Barbara Ehrenreich called the Act an effort to “‘re-stigmatize’ out-of-wedlock births as ‘illegitimate.’”<sup>35</sup>

Work was another primary component of PRWORA. The bill required recipients to work a minimum of 30 hours a week in job-related activities. Work-related activities included paid labor, job search, and interviews.<sup>36</sup> States also

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<sup>33</sup> *Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996*, H.R. 3734.

<sup>34</sup> Part A – Block Grants to States for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, PRWORA.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, “Preface” in *Lost Ground: Welfare Reform, Poverty and Beyond*, eds. Randy Albeda and Ann Withorn, (Cambridge, MA, South End Press, 2002), vii.

<sup>36</sup> Section 407, PRWORA, 1996.

were required to ensure that child support was being collected and that fraud and abuse were researched and prosecuted.<sup>37</sup> Pregnant women and victims of domestic violence were allowed exemptions from the work requirements for a one-year period.<sup>38</sup> Crucial to the welfare reform measures was the time limit now imposed upon recipients. Time limits were established at the federal level as being five years maximum. No recipient could collect benefits for longer than five years, but the states were allowed to determine their own time limits, so long as they were under the federal requirement.<sup>39</sup>

The changes to the welfare system were vast and encompassed every aspect of the benefit programs. The Department of Health and Human Services created a comparison of AFDC and TANF in order to explain the changes. The list also illustrates what women lost with PRWORA. The list includes all benefit changes. Under PRWORA, AFDC was changed from an entitlement program where recipients were eligible so long as they did not violate regulations to a time-limited program with no guarantees of support.<sup>40</sup> Work requirements changed under the new law as well. The previous system allotted money for the JOBS program and allowed exemptions from work for mothers with children under the age of three or for parents attending school. In contrast, under the new law, “single parent recipients are required to participate in 20 hours per week upon implementation of the law, increasing to at least 30 hours per week by FY 2000.” The new law allowed no exemptions for school unless included in the

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<sup>37</sup> Part A – Block Grants to States for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, PRWORA.

<sup>38</sup> Section 408, PRWORA, 1996.

<sup>39</sup> Welfare Reform; A WEEL overview, 1996, and PRWORA, Part A.

<sup>40</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, “Comparison of Prior Law and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193.)”

state's plan. The new law also enforced the mandatory hours, stating:

“Individuals who receive assistance for 2 months and are not working or exempt from the work requirements are required to participate in community service, with the hours and tasks to be determined by the state.”<sup>41</sup> The message was clear: either work for wages or work for free.

The new provisions in the law also allowed invasions of recipients' privacy and prevented convicted criminals from accessing services. Prior to PRWORA, no provisions allowed states to test recipients for drugs. However, under the new regulations, states could perform drug tests. Also, previously, people convicted of drug-related offenses could apply for benefits so long as they did not break the law while receiving assistance. However, under the new law, anyone convicted of a drug offense was “prohibited for life from receiving benefits under the TANF and Food Stamp programs.”<sup>42</sup> While states could apply for waivers to be exempted from this aspect of the new law, this regulation was damaging to women attempting to rebuild their lives once out of jail.

Reduction of illegitimacy was an important component of PRWORA. In order to reduce out-of-wedlock births, the new plan included abstinence education, which received a budget of over \$50 million. This aspect called for states to develop a plan “to provide abstinence education to high-risk groups.”<sup>43</sup> For many, the definition of high-risk groups carried racial overtones. Director of

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<sup>41</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, “Comparison of Prior Law and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193.)

<sup>42</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, “Comparison of Prior Law and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193.)

<sup>43</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, “Comparison of Prior Law and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193.)

the Adolescent Voices Project, Robin A. Robinson, recalled the following discussion with “a well-regarded economist in the area of welfare reform”:

I told him that in the context of my life experience, his proposed remedies were problematic at best and irrelevant at worst, and they troubled me, whereupon he told me that I (that is, my experience) didn't count. I asked him to explain. “Well,” he said, “first of all, you are white.” I replied that statistics showed that the majority of teen mothers in the United States are white. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘you are intelligent.’ ‘Did he have evidence to suggest that most teen mothers are stupid?’ I queried. [...] ‘Well,’ he said, ‘Your attractive.’ ‘Let me see is I have this straight,’ I said. ‘Your influence on policy at the national level, rests on assumptions that we teen mothers are poor, black, dumb and ugly?’<sup>44</sup>

Robinson challenged the official's characterization of teen mothers, but “he argued that to address the social problems of teen motherhood, we had to use those assumptions.”<sup>45</sup> The “well-regarded economist in the area of welfare reform” was not the only one to put forth this viewpoint.

Douglas and Michaels explore media images of teen-mothers in the 1980s and 1990s. As they explain: “The ‘epidemic’ of teen pregnancies was illustrated by visits to high school programs to keep girls in school, and we saw a fair mix of black and white teens. But when the stories talked about some of these girls going on welfare, invariably the face that we saw was black.”<sup>46</sup> These authors further point out, “gradually these [media] stories merged into one giant pathology of a metastasizing welfare system pushed to its limits by irresponsible, oversexed

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<sup>44</sup> Robin A. Robinson, “Bearing Witness to Teen Motherhood,” in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, p. 108.

<sup>45</sup> Robin A. Robinson, “Bearing Witness to Teen Motherhood,” in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, p. 109.

<sup>46</sup> Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 190.

black girls.”<sup>47</sup> Scholars Laura Flanders, Janine Jackson, and Dan Shadoan, in their essay, “Media Lies: Media, Public opinion, and Welfare,” also claim that media stories provided distorted views of teen mothers and welfare. They explain: “At best, the selection of certain women to represent ‘welfare mothers’ reinforced misleading stereotypes, especially with regard to teenagers and AFDC. When the age of welfare recipients was given in media reports, they were generally 17, 18, or 19 years old – even though only 6 percent of mothers who receive AFDC are younger than 20.”<sup>48</sup> This essay goes on to state, “photo editors consistently skewed the picture in a racist way. When *U.S. News & World Report* (1/16/95) illustrated a cover piece on welfare – six of the seven pictures were women of color, mostly African Americans.”<sup>49</sup> Media representations of teen mothers and welfare recipients contained racial overtones and promoted racial stereotypes.

The new programs dealing with abstinence education and marriage promotion were part of the original enactment of the bill in 1996, Section 403(a)(2). This section of the act was reinforced in 2000, with a “final rule” release from the Department of Health and Human Services. This section provided a bonus to states that reduced illegitimate births without a correlating rise in the abortion rates. This section, titled, “Bonus to Reward Decrease in Illegitimacy Ratio,” had a budget of \$100 million to be divided among the five

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<sup>47</sup> Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 190.

<sup>48</sup> Laura Flanders with Janine Jackson and Dan Shadoan, “Media Lies: Media, Public Opinion, and Welfare,” in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> Laura Flanders with Janine Jackson and Dan Shadoan, “Media Lies: Media, Public Opinion, and Welfare,” in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, p. 109.

states with the largest decrease in out-of-wedlock births.<sup>50</sup> Sociologist Sharon Hays explains that this “anti-abortion” bonus is problematic, as “the welfare reform act didn’t include any proposals for family planning. In fact, it absolutely prohibited the promotion of family planning by any method other than abstinence.”<sup>51</sup> The abstinence-only education platform began with the passage of PRWORA but increased by 1998. The bonus was for the years 1998-2002.

Accompanying the reform of welfare and as a means to cut social spending, the new law allowed the privatization of welfare administration. In 1996, companies like Lockheed Martin and Electronic Data Systems bid on state contracts to administer welfare programs. Journalist Nina Bernstein explained: “To state and county officials facing capped welfare budgets and financial penalties if they fail to move most recipients into jobs in two years, a fixed price contract with a corporation has a strong appeal.”<sup>52</sup> In addition to corporate administration of welfare, the new law sought to include the marketplace in the welfare-to-work programs. The new law gave checks to businesses for hiring welfare recipients. As Clinton stated, employers should go to their state governments and say: “Okay, you give me the check. I’ll use it as an income supplement, I’ll train these people, I’ll help them to start their lives.”<sup>53</sup> Churches, as well as businesses, could receive the income supplement to hire people.<sup>54</sup> This

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<sup>50</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, “Implementation of Section 403(a)(2) of Social Security Act: Bonus to Reward Decrease in Illegitimacy Ratio,” *Code of Federal Regulations* 45 (2000), pt. 283.

<sup>51</sup> “Sharon Hays on the Real Cost of Welfare Reform, an interview by Pat MacEnulty,” *The Sun*, August 2004, 4-11.

<sup>52</sup> Nina Bernstein, “Giant Companies Entering Race to Run State Welfare Programs,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Bill Clinton “Remarks on Welfare Reform,” August 22, 1996.

<sup>54</sup> Bill Clinton “Remarks on Welfare Reform,” August 22, 1996.

began the privatization of welfare programs and the abdication of the government's responsibility to its citizens.

The new welfare legislation ended the old system of entitlement, replacing it with a system of privatization and sanctions. The new system hurt recipients and robbed poor women of the right to be mothers. It invaded privacy with drug testing and family planning activities. PRWORA stereotyped welfare recipients and punished single and teenage mothers.

PRWORA is a complex legislative measure that rewrote an entire section of the Social Security Act of 1935. The new provisions violate women's privacy and right to choice. PRWORA altered the welfare system in ways that made it impossible for women to succeed.

Sociologist Sharon Hays describes PRWORA as "a social experiment in legislating family values and the work ethic."<sup>55</sup> This social experiment has severe consequences for poor women. Having for years been portrayed as lazy, uneducated, cheating the system, and more often than not, black, welfare mothers faced a challenge to achieve respectability in America. They were under attack from politicians, the moral majority and the general public, but they were little understood. The passage of PRWORA changed not only their lives, but also the lives of their families as they lost their right to make the choice whether or not to stay home with their children. The reform of the welfare system affects all women, not just poor women. The Committee of One Hundred Women asserted:

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<sup>55</sup> Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke With Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 10.



“women who receive welfare benefits have the same rights as all women.”<sup>56</sup>

Welfare reform challenges the idea that all women have the same rights, whether married or single, poor or rich, black or white, homosexual or heterosexual. The rights of women were trampled under the PRWORA.

### **Race and Welfare: The Myth of the Welfare Queen**

The myth of the Welfare Queen, as promoted by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, played a large role in the push for welfare reform. The Welfare Queen was a woman who cheated the welfare system, had many children by different fathers, and sat at home watching soap operas all day, neglecting her children. She was the classic example of the “undeserving” poor. This image came to be associated with all welfare mothers, even though the Welfare Queen had no basis in reality. According to popular belief, the Welfare Queen was African American. Her presence elicited negative feelings from the general public towards welfare recipients. She founded the call for reform beginning in the 1960s.

To the public, black mothers represented a system designed to support illegitimacy. As Rickie Solinger explains: “The growing belief in the Welfare Queen was reinforced by an overlapping belief that poor Black mothers were illegitimate mothers of illegitimate children, were illegitimate caretakers and ought to get jobs.”<sup>57</sup> The Welfare Queen was an enduring image for the white middle class as politicians repeatedly used her to explain why social spending should be cut. She lasted through the decades of the 1970s and 1980s due to the enormous amount of press she received. She represented everything wrong with

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<sup>56</sup> Committee of One Hundred Women.

<sup>57</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 143.

the welfare system and subsequently the United States because she “was the symbol of dependent women making bad choices.”<sup>58</sup>

This enduring symbol of everything wrong with welfare remained in the media throughout the debates on welfare reform. In her article, “Beyond Welfare Queens: Developing a Race, Class, and Gender Analysis of Welfare and Welfare Reform,” Chris Crass examined news reports during the 1990s debate on welfare reform. She explains: “The image of the welfare mother in the news was that of a Black teenager.”<sup>59</sup> The picture of a Black teen mother usually accompanied inflammatory statements such as the one from journalist Jonathan Alter: “Every threat to the fabric of this country – from poverty to crime to homelessness – is connected to out of wedlock teen pregnancy.”<sup>60</sup> A prime example of the media contribution to the idea of the Black Welfare Queen was the cover story in *US News & World Report* (01/95), which used pictures of seven welfare recipients; “all but one was a woman of color and most of them were Black.”<sup>61</sup> The media consistently portrayed the welfare system as a program for women of color even though the evidence showed that more white women than black women received benefits.

Feminist scholar Rickie Solinger provided a lecture titled “7 Ways of Looking at Poor Women” in 2004. In this speech, she explored the many ways

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<sup>58</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 170.

<sup>59</sup> Chris Crass, “Beyond Welfare Queens: Developing a race, Class, and Gender Analysis of Welfare and Welfare Reform,” published 1998, [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org) “Your online anarchist community.”

<sup>60</sup> Chris Crass, “Beyond Welfare Queens: Developing a race, Class, and Gender Analysis of Welfare and Welfare Reform,” published 1998, [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org) “Your online anarchist community.”

<sup>61</sup> Chris Crass, “Beyond Welfare Queens: Developing a race, Class, and Gender Analysis of Welfare and Welfare Reform,” published 1998, [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org) “Your online anarchist community.”

that people with a lack of understanding towards poverty view and describe welfare mothers. Five out of the seven views of poor women center on choice. They include the views that poor mothers are selfish; only caring about their own needs. The welfare mother makes vulgar decisions, having too many children that she cannot support. Another view of poor women is the comparative (I can do it, why can't she). People also generally view poverty as a problem with personal morality; they claim the poor woman lacks good morals and therefore uses poor judgment. Views of poor women also claim that they exhibit ridiculous behavior in many aspects of their life, such as where to live, where to work, and how to dress.<sup>62</sup> These views illustrate that to most people, poverty is a matter of women's choices - the wrong choices. During the 1990s welfare reform debate, hundreds of stories ran about women on welfare. Reporters used all of these stereotypes but added that these poor choice makers were women of color.

Barbara Ehrenreich labeled PRWORA a racist bill. As she explained: "The stereotype of the welfare-recipient – lazy, overweight, and endlessly fecund – had been a coded way of talking about African Americans at least since George Wallace's 1968 presidential campaign."<sup>63</sup> The Welfare Queen is always viewed or spoken about as being a black woman out to cheat the system. Race is an important factor in levels of poverty, as "African-American and Latina women are

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<sup>62</sup> Rickie Solinger, "7 Ways of Looking at Poor Women," Lecture, Women's History Month Lecture, University of Montana, 3/15/2004.

<sup>63</sup> Ehrenreich, in *Lost Ground*, ed. By Randy Albeda and Ann Withorn, p. viiii.

more likely to be poor than are white women, and are likely to stay poor for longer stretches of time than are whites.”<sup>64</sup>

Academics view many of the aspects of PRWORA as having a racial bias, but programs focused on reducing illegitimacy have the most racial overtones. As sociologist Kenneth J. Neubeck explains: “Among the stated goals of the legislation was encouragement of marriage and reduction of births out of wedlock, and early versions of the bill contained statistics on ‘illegitimacy’ rates by race.”<sup>65</sup> White politicians have long been obsessed with black women’s sexuality; this is reflected in welfare discussions that center on illegitimacy by race. Additionally, the obsessive concern with the sexuality of women of color is reflected in the individual states’s programs under PRWORA. “Those states with high proportions of African American and Latinos/as on the welfare rolls are the very states most likely to have punitive family cap policies and to have the harshest sanctions for violations of welfare department rules.”<sup>66</sup>

Given the evidence of harsher rules in states with large minority populations as well as the national attention given to racialized views of illegitimacy, it is clear that PRWORA is a racist program. Sanctions against recipients can cause them to leave the welfare rolls, but “people of color were more likely than white to have left the rolls because they were sanctioned off

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<sup>64</sup> Lisa Catanzarite and Vilma Ortiz, “Family Matters, Work Matters? Poverty Among Women of Color and White Women,” in *For Crying Out Loud: Women’s Poverty in the United States*, (Boston, MA, South End Press, 1996), 121.

<sup>65</sup> Kenneth J. Neubeck, “Attacking Welfare Racism/ Honoring Poor People’s Human Rights,” in *Lost Ground*, ed. Albeda and Withorn, p. 117.

<sup>66</sup> Kenneth J. Neubeck, “Attacking Welfare Racism/ Honoring Poor People’s Human Rights,” in *Lost Ground*, ed. Albeda and Withorn, p. 119.

(punished) by welfare officials.”<sup>67</sup> The image of the Welfare Queen as a lazy, black woman cheating the system as well as racial media portrayals of welfare recipients contributed to the drive for welfare reform and to the development of the PRWORA. However, race is not the only factor contributing to the development of discriminatory policies; gender is also a factor. Women are more likely than men to be poor, so the new regulations attack women as well as minorities. The new system revives the questions of morality in determining “worthiness” to receive government assistance. A mother’s morality is once again playing a large role in the development of welfare policies.

### **Morality, Marriage and Motherhood**

Morality played an important role in determining eligibility for public assistance from colonial times. In the 1950s and 1960s, most morality clauses were aimed at African American women who had recently begun to access the welfare system. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down different morality clauses such as the “no-man-in-the-house-rule,” but the passage of PRWORA brought morality into the welfare system again. Morality became an aspect of welfare reform through the marriage promotion and abstinence- only programs. In addition, motherhood became a class privilege through the new welfare rules. Morality, marriage, and motherhood were all tied to the new welfare rules as politicians called for a restoration of “family values.” Unfortunately, politicians defined family values narrowly, as had been done in the

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<sup>67</sup> Kenneth J. Neubeck, “Attacking Welfare Racism/ Honoring Poor People’s Human Rights,” in *Lost Ground*, ed. Albeda and Withorn, p. 119.

past. Welfare mothers would be judged based upon a patriarchal ideal of male-headed families and middle-class womanhood.

Many states developed marriage promotion programs beginning in 1996. Some state based initiatives included extra money paid to families on TANF if the parents were married, a bonus given to women who married while receiving assistance, and media campaigns promoting marriage and abstinence.<sup>68</sup> In several states, caseworkers received training in marriage promotion, and mentoring programs were developed for “at risk families.” In Hawaii, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Utah, laws allow the use TANF funds for caseworkers to perform home visits focused on relationships between parents.<sup>69</sup> Home visits to check up on parents first occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until the early 1970s. The re-addition of home visits to welfare reflects a return to a punitive, judging system. All these initiatives take money away from welfare programs for the development of marriage programs. The promotion of marriage is costly for welfare mothers.

Some states developed marriage promotion programs in 1996; however, family formation was not stringently enforced at the federal level until 2000. However, in 2000, the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), finalized its bonus system for the marriage promotion campaign. The “Bonus to Reward States for High Performance under the TANF Program,” issued in 2000, contained a new section of PRWORA. This section, number 270.4(f), was for measuring Family

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<sup>68</sup> National Welfare Engine, “Family Formation Bills Attempted or Passed in States,” 2001.

<sup>69</sup> National Welfare Engine, “Family Formation Bills Attempted or Passed in States,” 2001.

Formation and Stability.<sup>70</sup> This section emphasized that DHHS was concerned with “the second statutory purpose of TANF, i.e., ‘to promote marriage.’”<sup>71</sup> This new section also served as a response to critics of the marriage promotion program who complained that “stable but less traditional families, such as separated families, common-law families, same sex families, or two related adults living together would not be counted for bonus purposes.”<sup>72</sup> The response from the department on this question did not truly address the issues concerned. It stated: “We recognize the diversity of views on this issue, but point out that the second purpose of TANF includes the promotion of marriage.”<sup>73</sup> The marriage issue is a point of discrimination as well as contradiction in the TANF regulations. It affirms an ideal of “family values” that is outdated and discriminates against many families. TANF pushes marriage for welfare recipients but fails to recognize that marriage is impossible or undesirable for some citizens.

Marriage promotion, under the guise of welfare reform, targets poor women and tells them that marriage will solve their problems. However, promoting marriage is problematic in that the programs fail to recognize those who cannot marry. Same-sex families are prohibited in all states, except Massachusetts, yet they also are families and raise children. Working for Equality

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<sup>70</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human services, administration for Children and Families, “Bonus to reward States for High Performance under the TANF Program,” *Code of Federal Regulations* 45 (2000), pts. 265,270.

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human services, administration for Children and Families, “Bonus to reward States for High Performance under the TANF Program,” *Code of Federal Regulations* 45 (2000), pts. 265,270.

<sup>72</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human services, administration for Children and Families, “Bonus to reward States for High Performance under the TANF Program,” *Code of Federal Regulations* 45 (2000), pts. 265,270.

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human services, administration for Children and Families, “Bonus to reward States for High Performance under the TANF Program,” *Code of Federal Regulations* 45 (2000), pts. 265,270.

and Economic Liberation (WEEL), a welfare advocacy group based in Montana, explains: “Family Formation Legislation openly discriminates against gay and lesbian couples by promoting an institution in which their commitments are not recognized.”<sup>74</sup> Family formation policies were enforced beginning in 2000 and expanded in 2002 and 2003, under the administration of Bush (II). Same-sex families are not the only group for whom this legislation causes problems.

Victims of domestic violence cannot safely remain married, yet this legislation is an attempt to prevent them from divorcing. A current case illustrates the dangers of Family Formation Legislation to victims of domestic violence. Shawwna Hughes left her abusive husband while he was in jail for beating her and filed for divorce. In the midst of divorce filings, she discovered she was pregnant. “The state of Washington objected to the divorce because it might leave the state unable to identify a father and pursue him for repayment of welfare money used to support the child.”<sup>75</sup> The divorce has been denied until Hughes’s baby is born and paternity testing is completed.<sup>76</sup> Victims and survivors of domestic violence need help, not programs designed to keep them in an abusive marriage or relationship.

Marriage is not the answer to problems of poverty. Poor women often cannot afford to marry as marriage will reduce their access to services or benefits, such as housing programs. Additionally, the push for marriage and family

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<sup>74</sup> Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL), “Government Marriage Proposals: Speak Now or Forever Hold Your Peace,” 2002.

<sup>75</sup> Nicholas k. Geranois, “Pregnant Woman Denied Divorce: Spokane Judge Rejects Request Despite Husband’s Physical Abuse,” in *Missoulia*, January 10, 2005.

<sup>76</sup> Nicholas k. Geranois, “Pregnant Woman Denied Divorce: Spokane Judge Rejects Request Despite Husband’s Physical Abuse,” in *Missoulia*, January 10, 2005.



formation focus welfare funds on job training for men, in order to make them breadwinners.<sup>77</sup> By doing this, the government ensures that women will have fewer job skills and be unable to find good-paying employment. This increases the wage gap. Economists Mary Huff Stevenson and Elaine Donovan explore the wage gap in their essay, “How the U.S. Economy Creates Poverty and Inequality.” These two scholars examined wage differences between men and women and their findings illustrate the vast differences in pay rates. This essay shows that the average difference between white men and women with a high school education is \$9000 annually. The difference between wages of white men and black men with similar education is \$8000 annually. The difference between black men and black women is almost \$5000 annually.<sup>78</sup> The wage gap increases when men receive training and education and women do not. Without skills to find good-paying jobs, poor women will continue to need social services.

The marriage promotion programs received a boost from the “final rule” memo in 2000. The monetary incentive for states that increase marriage rates ensured that Family Formation programs would receive more money and attention. The 2000 election also focused attention on marriage promotion. During his campaign, George W. Bush (II) vowed to establish an office for private charities with programs on abstinence and marriage promotions. This office would “help America’s religious groups treat social ills with government

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<sup>77</sup> WEEL, “Government Marriage Proposals: Speak Now or Forever Hold Your Peace,” 2002.

<sup>78</sup> Mary Huff Stevenson and Elaine Donovan, “How The U.S. Economy Creates Poverty and Inequality,” in *For Crying Out Loud*, eds. Dujon and Withorn, p. 74-75.

funds.”<sup>79</sup> This promise guaranteed that private, faith-based organizations would get government money for instituting social programs. Bush seeks to privatize welfare programs within religious groups.

George W. Bush entered office in 2001 with his own ideals about how to “fix” welfare; his main idea centered on pursuing the marriage promotion and abstinence only education programs. Bush (II) began his presidency by appointing Wade Horn to the position of assistant secretary of DHHS for welfare.<sup>80</sup> Wade Horn, founder of the National Fatherhood Initiative, and Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, both private faith-based groups, proposed setting aside money annually for the promotion of marriage.<sup>81</sup> Ehrenreich describes Rector as having “an obsessive fascination with female sexuality, especially the sexuality of women of color.”<sup>82</sup> Yet, he was, with Wade Horn, an important adviser to Bush (II) on issues regarding women’s morality and the importance of marriage.

Wade Horn, director of the National Fatherhood Initiative, advocated for marriage programs under the Bush administration. He was also a proponent of legislation for “encouraging responsible fatherhood.”<sup>83</sup> In advocating for marriage programs and responsible fatherhood legislation, Horn drafted five principles for drafting legislation on fatherhood. His five principles included: promotion of married fatherhood; de-emphasization of financial support while encouraging emotional support from unwed fathers; flexibility of participation for

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<sup>79</sup> Catherine Edwards, “Bush Embraces Charitable Choice: George W. Bush, Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives,” in *Insight on the News*, February 26, 2001, v17, issue 8, p.22.

<sup>80</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground*, 106.

<sup>81</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground*, 106.

<sup>82</sup> Ehrenreich, in *Lost Ground*, ed. By Randy Albeda and Ann Withorn, p. viii.

<sup>83</sup> Wade F. Horn, *The National Fatherhood Initiative*, 1999.

the non-custodial father in their children's lives; increased faith-based efforts of fatherhood promotions; and developing community based programs on fatherhood.<sup>84</sup>

Robert Rector, from the Heritage Foundation, also worked as an advisor to Bush (II). His group applied for and received millions of dollars from the Bush administration to develop and teach abstinence only education programs across the country. The Heritage Foundation, a faith-based group, wholly endorsed Bush's plan for promoting marriage. Rector, with Melissa G. Pardue, also of the Heritage Foundation, published a report titled "Understanding the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative," in which they claim: "The collapse of marriage in the principal cause of child poverty in the United States."<sup>85</sup> Robert Rector and Wade Horn were principle advisors to Bush (II) on issues of family formation and marriage promotion.

Rector proposed several changes to the welfare system to reinstate "family values." They included: replacing financial incentives for increasing marriage rates with financial punishments for states that do not increase them; offering money to parents who marry; and reserving public housing programs for married couples.<sup>86</sup> Wade Horn endorsed many of Robert Rector's proposals for marriage promotion, including one that offered women \$1000 annually for five years if their first child was born after marriage.<sup>87</sup> Horn added ideas that would increase

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<sup>84</sup> Wade F. Horn, *The National Fatherhood Initiative*, 1999.

<sup>85</sup> Robert E. Rector and Melissa G. Pardue, "Understanding the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative," published by the Heritage Foundation, [www.heritage.org](http://www.heritage.org)

<sup>86</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, "Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State," in *Lost Ground*, 106.

<sup>87</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, "Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State," in *Lost Ground*, 106-107.

the pressure already placed on single mothers. These included limiting programs such as cash assistance, public housing, and Head Start to married parents.<sup>88</sup> He also advocated refusing services to single mothers unless money was left after helping married parents.<sup>89</sup> The war against single mothers under the Bush (II) administration had begun.

By 2002, Bush (II) was pursuing stricter compliance regulations for states in regards to marriage promotion. In a speech delivered in February 2002, Bush pronounced: “Children reared by married parents in intact families are more likely to complete high school and are less likely to be poor, to commit crimes, or to have mental health problems than are children reared in single-parent families.”<sup>90</sup> He further explained that his administration’s approach to ending welfare dependency and to promoting marriage was “to provide financial incentives for states, often working together with private and faith-based organizations, to develop and implement innovative programs.”<sup>91</sup> From this point forward, faith-based programs would receive millions of dollars in federal money to teach marriage promotion programs as well as abstinence only education classes in schools.

Marriage promotion programs consistently focused on the value of a patriarchal family model. Motherhood in a two-parent family is therefore the ideal. This exhibits the class bias in welfare reform. As Linda Gordon explains:

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<sup>88</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground*, 106-107.

<sup>89</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground*, 107.

<sup>90</sup> George W. Bush, Working Toward Independence: Bush Administration Proposal on Welfare Reform,” The White House, February 26, 2002.

<sup>91</sup> George W. Bush, Working Toward Independence: Bush Administration Proposal on Welfare Reform,” The White House, February 26, 2002.

“The new values represent a class double standard that esteems female parental labor among the prosperous but not among the poor.”<sup>92</sup> This class-based double standard praises motherhood while also demonizing it. The program that was established to help mothers now terms them undeserving without a male partner.<sup>93</sup> Motherhood is now a class privilege. Rickie Solinger explained that politicians decided, against the children’s best interest, that low-income children should be in daycare.<sup>94</sup> Columnist Ellen Goodman recognized the problems with the new welfare programs early on in the debates over welfare reform. She addressed these issues in an essay titled: “The End of Motherhood as We Knew It.”<sup>95</sup> As she explained, the message of PRWORA was contradictory. Just as politicians cried for the restoration of family values, they sent poor mothers to work.<sup>96</sup> In her column she stated:

Rather than acknowledging any conflict in these messages, we divide the two groups of unemployed mothers – not by class or by fate or by a husband’s paycheck – into two moral categories. The one virtuous, the other promiscuous, lazy and maybe neglectful. We would rather not know how many of today’s AFDC mothers were yesterday’s married mothers.<sup>97</sup>

Marriage is tied to morality when discussing welfare mothers; it implies “that only a male – the father – could confer respectability on a child.”<sup>98</sup>

While Congress and the Bush (II) administration were pushing welfare mothers out the door to work (unless they got married), society was focusing on

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<sup>92</sup> Linda Gordon, “Who Deserves Help? Who Must Provide?” in *Lost Ground*, 21-22.

<sup>93</sup> Linda Gordon, “Who Deserves Help? Who Must Provide?” in *Lost Ground*, 21-22.

<sup>94</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 218.

<sup>95</sup> Ellen Goodman, “The End of Motherhood as We Knew It,” *Boston Globe*, September 17, 1995.

<sup>96</sup> Ellen Goodman, “The End of Motherhood as We Knew It,” *Boston Globe*, September 17, 1995.

<sup>97</sup> Ellen Goodman, “The End of Motherhood as We Knew It,” *Boston Globe*, September 17, 1995.

<sup>98</sup> Ehrenreich, in *Lost Ground*, ed. By Randy Albeda and Ann Withorn, p. viii.

the benefits of stay-at-home mothers. In 2004, *Time Magazine* published “The Case for Staying Home,” which glorified women who left work to be full time mothers. The women in the article all left high-powered, high paying jobs to stay at home. The article quoted one woman saying, “I know it’s the right thing.”<sup>99</sup> The author provided statistics that showed that the number of mothers in the work force was declining and stated: “Most women who step out of their careers find unexpected delights on the home front, not to mention the enormous relief of no longer worrying about shortchanging their kids.”<sup>100</sup> The message, complete with photos of five women, four of whom were white, who had made this choice, was clear: staying at home with the kids is the right thing for women to do. However, these women were all highly educated with husbands earning more than minimum wage. The push was for middle and upper class women to stay home to nurture their children. Poor women had to work.

Along with revived notions of motherhood and marriage, the new welfare platform renewed the focus on morality and women’s sexuality. Gwendolyn Mink discusses the issue of sexual privacy and explains that this is part of reproductive freedom. TANF is rife with policies that interfere with privacy and reproductive freedom. Paternity establishment is one of these invasive policies. As Mink explains: “These provisions single out nonmarital mothers for scrutiny and punishment, as paternity is automatically established at birth if a mother is married. A mother who is not married, who does not know who her child’s biological father is, or who does not want anything to do with him must

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<sup>99</sup> Claudia Wallis, “The Case for Staying Home,” *Time Magazine*, March 22, 2004.

<sup>100</sup> Claudia Wallis, “The Case for Staying Home,” *Time Magazine*, March 22, 2004.

nevertheless provide welfare officials with information about him.”<sup>101</sup> Mothers who refuse to cooperate with establishing paternity have their benefits cut; thus, they are forced to provide private information and answer intrusive questions such as: “How many sexual partners have you had?”<sup>102</sup>

The “family cap” policies also infringe on a women’s sexual and reproductive freedoms. Family caps allow state welfare boards to deny assistance to children born while the mother is receiving assistance. In essence, they punish women for choosing to give birth over having an abortion.<sup>103</sup> The “illegitimacy bonus” provides a contradictory standard on this issue. The bonus provides money to states that reduce illegitimacy without a rise in the abortion rates, but the family cap policy punishes women for completing a pregnancy.<sup>104</sup> The administration’s answer to this conundrum was the abstinence-only education program.

The TANF abstinence program’s main target is teenagers. To reach this target audience, media campaigns were started across the country. With one goal of PRWORA being the reduction of out-of-wedlock births, the focus turned to abstinence instead of birth control. Abstinence only sexual education was a means of controlling not only reproduction but also sexuality. It taught women and girls to abstain from sex rather than how to use birth control. The Bush administration focused a great deal of time and money on the abstinence-only education programs. As Mink explains: “The abstinence education program is required to

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<sup>101</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground*, 102.

<sup>102</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground*, 102.

<sup>103</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground*, 103.

<sup>104</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground*, 103.

teach women not to have sex, let alone babies, until they are ‘economically self-sufficient.’”<sup>105</sup> To ensure the message is taught sufficiently, states and the federal government use part of the TANF funding for grants to faith-based groups to develop and implement abstinence only education programs.

In 2003, faith-based groups received \$1 billion. Most of this money went to groups that provide forms of social services. Some groups who receive this money run homeless shelters, fund drug rehabilitation programs, or work with AIDS victims.<sup>106</sup> However, a large amount of money is given to groups like the Heritage Foundation, which provides abstinence – only education in schools and welfare offices. The abstinence platform of welfare reform prohibits the discussion of any type of birth control other than celibacy. In addition, funding for birth control has been cut, so access to other contraceptives is limited for poor women. As Sharon Hays states: “This is a self-defeating policy.”<sup>107</sup> The push for a new morality for welfare mothers is contradictory and invasive. Rewarding states for a reduction in illegitimacy without a rise in the abortion rates while simultaneously cutting access to birth control pushes a religious agenda and invades poor women’s privacy.

### **Advocacy Groups and Recipients**

President Clinton signed PRWORA into law with little outcry from recipients or welfare rights organizations. Arguments against the new legislation came from academic circles and religious organizations, but not from welfare

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<sup>105</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground*, 103.

<sup>106</sup> Laura Meckler, Associated Press, “U.S. Gave \$1 Billion to faith – based groups in 2003,” IN *Missoulian*, January 3, 2005. Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Sharon Hays, interview, in *The Sun*, p. 7.



rights groups. After the bill was enacted and implementation of the new rules began, there was an outcry against the harsh new regulations. Between 1996 and 2003, welfare rights groups developed in several states in the wake of welfare reform. Their purpose was to advocate for recipients; they “hoped to infuse the process from the ground up with strategies for women’s personal and collective empowerment.”<sup>108</sup> The rise of welfare rights groups involved recipients in attacking the new regulations. The groups worked individually in their own states and nationally to protest harsh rules. The new activism from recipients and the rise of welfare rights groups brought new attention to the welfare debate. This time the voices of recipients were included.

Welfare rights organizations began in several states after the passage of PRWORA. The largest of these groups, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), began in New York City and spread to include chapters in Arkansas, Massachusetts, Texas, California, Minnesota, New Jersey, and New Mexico.<sup>109</sup> The target of ACORN was the Work Experience Program (WEP) that welfare reform instituted for recipients. WEP is the program that forces recipients to work without pay in exchange for their cash assistance grants. ACORN was able to mobilize over 17,000 WEP participants in New York City to organize a union under the WEP Workers Organizing Committee (WWOC).<sup>110</sup> WWOC advocated and performed collective bargaining for WEP participants to ensure safe and fair working conditions. However, their primary

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<sup>108</sup> Janet L. Finn, Raquel Castellanos, Toni McOmber and Kate Kahan, “Working for Equality and Economic Liberation: Advocacy and Education for Welfare Reform,” *Affilia*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Summer, 2000, 294-310.

<sup>109</sup> Organizing Resources, [www.lincproject.org/acorn](http://www.lincproject.org/acorn) 2004.

<sup>110</sup> Organizing Resources, [www.lincproject.org/acorn](http://www.lincproject.org/acorn) 2004.

goal, in 1999, was to “restructure workfare into real living wage jobs by converting welfare grants into City pay checks and augmenting them with Federal Welfare to Work funding.”<sup>111</sup> By organizing recipients into a union to bargain for better treatment, ACORN and WWOC established the importance of participants as a labor market and forced recognition of their rights.

In Arizona, the Fresh Start Women’s Foundation (FSWF) published their statement, “The Eight D’s that Cause a Woman to Fall into Poverty,” to illustrate why welfare reform was an issue for every woman. The eight items on their list - “death, divorce, domestic violence, desertion, disability, drugs, or downsizing” - showcases why every woman in America needs to pay attention to the developments in the welfare system.<sup>112</sup> The mission statement from FSWF states: “every woman, regardless of her age, skills, or socioeconomic status, deserves the chance to reach her full potential.”<sup>113</sup> By focusing on the possibility that every woman could suffer a set back that sends her into poverty and dependence on the welfare system, FSWF brings the issue to all women.

The Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition (WROC) in Seattle, Washington is the oldest welfare rights group still in existence. WROC began in 1984 when welfare recipients from all over Seattle gathered to compare the treatment that recipients received in welfare offices.<sup>114</sup> Women attending the meeting discussed the many abuses they and others suffered at the hands of caseworkers and decided

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<sup>111</sup> Organizing Resources, [www.linproject.org/acorn](http://www.linproject.org/acorn) 2004.

<sup>112</sup> Fresh Start Women’s Foundation, “Eight D’s That Cause a Woman to Fall into Poverty,” [www.fswf.org](http://www.fswf.org) 2002.

<sup>113</sup> Fresh Start Women’s Foundation, “Eight D’s That Cause a Woman to Fall into Poverty,” [www.fswf.org](http://www.fswf.org) 2002.

<sup>114</sup> Jean Coleman, “Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition: Adding the Voice of Low Income People to Welfare Decision making,” [www.wroc.org](http://www.wroc.org) 2004.

to speak out. The passage of PRWORA led to increased activity among the directors and 3500 members of WROC as they organized protests on policy issues.<sup>115</sup> WROC's activities focused on abuses in the welfare system and brought them to the public's attention by using the media to address their concerns to public officials.

Post - welfare reform, two welfare rights organizations developed in Montana: Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL) and Montana's Welfare Action Coalition (MWAC). WEEL began in 1996 when case managers Raquel Castellanos and Toni McOmber decided to organize a group of welfare recipients to discuss PRWORA.<sup>116</sup> The group met regularly to discuss Montana's program of welfare reform, called Families Achieving Independence in Montana (FAIM). The informal meetings quickly became a formal advisory board for their newly formed welfare rights advocacy group, WEEL. Their mission is to help low-income families through advocacy, education, and campaigns to fight for social justice. The work of WEEL involves low-income families in the legislative process as lobbyists for welfare changes.<sup>117</sup> The other group in Montana, MWAC, began with a statewide meeting in August of 1996. The members of MWAC formalized their structure in June 1997 and began their mission of ending stereotypes of people living in poverty.<sup>118</sup> MWAC also worked

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<sup>115</sup> Jean Coleman, "Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition: Adding the Voice of Low Income People to Welfare Decision making," [www.wroc.org](http://www.wroc.org) 2004.

<sup>116</sup> Janet L. Finn, Raquel Castellanos, Toni McOmber and Kate Kahan, "Working for Equality and Economic Liberation: Advocacy and Education for Welfare Reform," *Affilia*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Summer, 2000, 296.

<sup>117</sup> Janet L. Finn, Raquel Castellanos, Toni McOmber and Kate Kahan, "Working for Equality and Economic Liberation: Advocacy and Education for Welfare Reform," *Affilia*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Summer, 2000, 294-310. .

<sup>118</sup> Montana's Welfare Action Coalition, [www.lincproject.org](http://www.lincproject.org)

for social justice programs in the aftermath of PRWORA and hoped to secure better governmental funding for supportive services.<sup>119</sup> The work of these two groups in Montana brought together middle class women with welfare recipients for a common dialogue on women's rights.

Welfare rights groups worked in their individual states but also formed regional coalitions. The Western Regional Welfare Activists, which consisted of groups from Montana, Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Nevada, and Utah, put together the "Welfare Made a Difference" campaign. This campaign displayed individual recipients in an effort to personify welfare for the public. The slogan of the campaign, "Investing in People to End Poverty," clearly illustrated the goal these groups had in publishing the booklets.<sup>120</sup> Using personal accounts to destroy popular images of welfare recipients, the booklets showed that welfare was an investment in individual people to help them work towards self-sufficiency. The booklets also demonstrated how PRWORA made it more difficult for people to work towards their goals. The campaign highlighted problems of domestic violence, explored difficulties faced by non-traditional families, and exposed how immigrants were injured by welfare reform.<sup>121</sup>

While welfare rights organizations were working at the state level in several regions, national protests against the harsh regulations of PROWRA continued. The Women's Committee of One Hundred issued their welfare reform proposal, titled: "Immodest Proposal: Rewarding Women's Work to End Poverty," in 2000. This publication targeted lawmakers before the deadline for

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<sup>119</sup> Montana's Welfare Action Coalition, [www.lincproject.org](http://www.lincproject.org)

<sup>120</sup> Western Regional Welfare Made a Difference Campaign Booklet," 2002.

<sup>121</sup> Western Regional Welfare Made a Difference Campaign Booklet," 2002.

TANF reauthorization in 2002. The committee's proposal called for programs to end poverty rather than ending welfare.<sup>122</sup> As the statement said: "Our project 2002 proposal calls for ending women's poverty by rewarding women's work on the job and at home."<sup>123</sup> The Committee's plans included ending the caregiver's penalty, recognizing women's unpaid work, creating a caregiver's allowance, and improving wages and work conditions."<sup>124</sup> The caregiver's penalty was the low wages paid to women performing paid caregiver work, such as in nursing homes and daycare centers. The caregiver's allowance would be paid to women who perform unpaid care giving in the home. Based upon understanding of women's lives and roles as well as research into causes and problems of poverty, the "Immodest Proposal" called on legislators to respect women. The Committee of One Hundred continued the welfare debate at the national level.

The Committee of One Hundred Women maintained the welfare debate at the national level while welfare rights groups worked at the state level. In 2001, several state organizations joined together to publish, "Proposals for TANF Reauthorization: National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support." The proposal, written as a letter to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in November 2001, brought together state groups into a national coalition on the subject of TANF and the reauthorization of PRWORA.<sup>125</sup> Endorsed and signed by groups such as ACORN, WEEL, Inter-tribal Council of Arizona, WROC,

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<sup>122</sup> Women's Committee of One Hundred, "Immodest Proposal: Rewarding Women's Work to End Poverty," 2000.

<sup>123</sup> Women's Committee of One Hundred, "Immodest Proposal: Rewarding Women's Work to End Poverty," 2000.

<sup>124</sup> Women's Committee of One Hundred, "Immodest Proposal: Rewarding Women's Work to End Poverty," 2000.

<sup>125</sup> "Proposal for TANF Reauthorization: National Campaign for Jobs and Support," 2001.

Center for Women Policy Studies – Washington D.C., and Protestants for the Common Good, the campaign for positive changes in welfare reflected a widespread belief that PRWORA was damaging to women. The proposals submitted by the group included: stopping the time clock; focusing on poverty reduction instead of caseload reduction; creating public jobs; increasing TANF cash assistance benefits; restoring assistance to immigrants; and counting education and training as work hours. The national campaign of welfare rights groups coincided with the efforts of the Committee of One Hundred to improve welfare conditions and prevent the reauthorization of the detrimental programs.

Welfare rights groups provided poor mothers with a conduit for speaking out against welfare reform. Recipients were given an opportunity to speak against abuses in the system and to address the harsh realities of their lives in public formats. The voices absent during the reform debates on Capitol Hill now came across loud and clear.

Welfare recipients expressed their frustration in writing, interviews and public speaking. Former welfare recipient and welfare rights organizer Laura Walker provided an excellent portrayal of a single mother in her essay, “If We Could, We Would Be Somewhere Else.” Walker became a welfare recipient due to a divorce from an abusive husband, which left her broke and in debt.<sup>126</sup> While raising her two boys alone, she discovered the difficulties of being a welfare recipient and trying to get desperately needed services. Walker provided a thorough accounting of the typical welfare mother’s day, which did not include

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<sup>126</sup> Laura walker, “If We Could, We Would Be Somewhere Else,” in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, 23-27.

eating chocolates in front of the television.<sup>127</sup> She also explained the humiliation for both the parent and children when dealing with poverty and the welfare office. She argued, “Something has to be done; the system has a lot of problems. They are happy to blame us as women, but it goes much deeper than that. We are just a symptom of the way things are being run in this state.”<sup>128</sup> Walker’s assessment of the system provides insight into the feelings of recipients; she felt blamed for a situation that was beyond her control. Walker also provided insight into how recipients felt in dealing with the welfare office when she said, “I don’t know if people realize that we *feel*.”<sup>129</sup> Recipients, so often viewed through images of the “Welfare Queen,” are devalued by society in their caretaking roles and then treated as beings that have no feelings and can be treated poorly.

In interviews with the author, former and current recipients shared their experiences with the welfare system.<sup>130</sup> An important thread through all the stories was the anger towards the image of the “Welfare Queen,” which women felt devalued their roles as mothers. “Mary,” a single mother with one child, had been receiving assistance for four months at the time of the interview. She decided to apply for cash assistance in order to obtain her certification from beauty school.<sup>131</sup> “Mary” learned about available services from someone other than her caseworker at the welfare office. When asked if her caseworker had offered her any information on additional services, she replied: “No, it was hush,

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<sup>127</sup> Laura walker, “If We Could, We Would Be Someplace Else,” in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, 23-27.

<sup>128</sup> Laura walker, “If We Could, We Would Be Someplace Else,” in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, 23-27.

<sup>129</sup> Laura walker, “If We Could, We Would Be Someplace Else,” in Dujon and Withorn, *For Crying Out Loud*, 23-27.

<sup>130</sup> All names of interviewees have been changed.

<sup>131</sup> Danielle Bird, Interview with “Mary” July 2003.

hush about everything. The woman who helped me, she knows a lot of stuff and she is the only reason I know about his stuff.” “Mary” also described her experiences in applying for welfare as “embarrassing” and said she felt “ashamed” for having asked for the assistance.<sup>132</sup> “Mary’s” experiences as a new recipient coincide with the experiences of “Jane,” a mother of three who received welfare off and on for sixteen years. “Jane” had recently completed treatment for substance abuse and had begun to receive welfare again six months prior to being interviewed. “Jane” felt that the application process as well as access to the office had become more difficult to prevent people from applying for benefits. “I think now that they make it way too hard. [...] They make it hard and that is good for them because that is less work for them because people are getting off of it and that looks great in their numbers.”<sup>133</sup> “Jane’s reason for receiving welfare was to stay home with her children, but she felt that the welfare office was pushing her to find a job. “Jane,” in comparing her experiences sixteen years ago and currently, felt that the welfare system had become more humiliating and difficult, as a means to push people off the rolls.<sup>134</sup> The experiences of “Mary” and “Jane” explained the feelings of recipients under the new harsh rules that force people off the system as quickly as possible.

“Claire,” a mother of three, had been on welfare in the 1980s and the late 1990s. Her interview provided a contrast between the old system and the new regulations. As she stated: “It used to be a safety net.”<sup>135</sup> She also felt benefits

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<sup>132</sup> Danielle Bird, Interview with “Mary” July 2003

<sup>133</sup> Danielle Bird, Interview with “Jane,” May 2003.

<sup>134</sup> Danielle Bird, Interview with “Jane,” May 2003.

<sup>135</sup> Danielle Bird, Interview with “Claire,” July 2003.



were more generous in the early 1980s, when she was allowed to attend school without any hassle from her caseworkers. “Claire” returned to the welfare system under the new time-clock regulations after receiving treatment for substance abuse. She described the new system as “inhumane.” As she explained: “The government doesn’t even care what happens to people after they leave welfare.” “Claire” also terms the reports that welfare reform is working a lie. She stated: “People are back in droves and they are worse off.” For “Claire,” welfare reform hurt more people than it helped. The new rules under PRWORA and the lack of transitional services to help people when they find a job make recipients and former recipients poorer than when they first applied for help. “Claire’s” assessment of the new regulations reflected those of “Jane.” Both women termed it a complete failure.<sup>136</sup>

Recipients, advocates, and scholars all termed welfare reform a failure. Each group proposed better ways to end welfare dependency, such as promoting education and valuing women’s work. The people damaged by welfare reform were most critical of the new measures and provided the greatest insight into the difficulties under the new system. Most often, they termed it a failure. Advocates continued to protest on behalf of recipients; they hoped to change the system into one that helped instead of hurt the poorest in the country. Feminist scholars sought changes that would tackle poverty and the problems associated with it rather than maintaining a system that victimized the poor. PRWORA damaged all women, as poverty is a woman’s issue. As illustrated by the Fresh Start Women’s Group in Arizona, with their eight D’s that can cause a woman to fall into

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<sup>136</sup> Danielle Bird, Interviews with “Claire” and “Jane,” 2003.

poverty, all women need to be concerned with what is happening with the welfare system. The varied groups who protested the changes to the welfare system illustrate the widespread concern over the loss of an important safety net for women.

### **Conclusion**

President Clinton entered office in 1994 with plans for welfare reform. The Republican majority in Congress after the 1994 elections ensured that welfare reform would be punitive. The passage of PRWORA in 1996 ended welfare as it had existed for over sixty years and began a program of punitive measures aimed at women. The push for welfare reform was influenced by the myth of the “Welfare Queen.” Public perceptions of welfare fraud and abuse allowed for the institution of the new welfare regulations with little outcry from the general population. However, scholars, the AARP, labor unions, charitable groups, and feminist organizations all protested its passage.

Protests from recipients and welfare rights organizations did not occur until after PRWORA had been passed. After 1996, welfare rights organizations sprouted across the country. These groups began mobilizing recipients to protest the harsher measures of welfare reform and organized for action. Welfare rights groups worked in states, joined together for regional campaigns, and contributed to national efforts to bring attention to abuse in the welfare system. As welfare reform continued, those protesting the new regulations published articles and books with the hopes of changing the public’s perceptions of welfare and recipients.

PRWORA reflected the beliefs that welfare was a program for black women and was rife with fraud and abuse. Certain measures, such as the illegitimacy programs, specifically targeted minority populations and alternative families. When Bush (II) entered office, he made the welfare system even more punitive. Bush's programs also increased the prejudice in the system with his focus on marriage as a means of ending welfare dependency. The focus on marriage promotion ignored the realities of family formation in the United States by narrowly defining a family. This measure increased the discriminatory measures in the welfare system. Non-traditional families were punished through the new measures.

Between 1996 and 2003, politicians encouraged the privatization of welfare programs. Government officials encouraged churches and private companies to participate in reducing welfare rolls. Private organizations could receive welfare grants to hire welfare recipients, or to participate in the Work Experience Program (WEP). Through WEP, recipients would work for private companies, government agencies, or churches in exchange for their welfare grants. The government's focus turned to private companies and churches to care for the poorest in the nation. Essentially, the government was abdicating its responsibility to its citizens.

Welfare ended with the passage of PRWORA. The federal safety net for the poor had been terminated on the altar of fiscal responsibility. In ending welfare, proponents of the changes called for personal responsibility and independence as American virtues that the welfare system stymied. Welfare

recipients, single mothers, same-sex couples, and women of color were the nationwide scapegoats for all the ills in society. While similar stereotypes had existed in the past, the 1990s, with its new technology, allowed for the widespread accusations of immorality and social ills. By providing the public with new images of these stereotypes, politicians were able to gain support for ending the welfare system. The public was not aware of the extent to which welfare helped people, nor were most Americans conscious of the damage that PRWORA would do to all social programs. Public perceptions were created by the media. News stories told the American people that welfare hurt society and that recipients were African American women who lied to receive benefits. Welfare reform, created by politicians and sold to people through the news media, punished women. It used stereotypes to promote the sexism, racism, and classism that have been inherent in the assistance programs from colonial days.

Sexism, racism, and classism in PWRORA are difficult to miss. Classism is evident in the push for middle and upper class women to remain home for the benefit of their children, while at the same time forcing poor mothers to work. The message is clear; middle and upper class children need a mother in the home to ensure good nurturing. Poor children are not as important; their mothers must work and leave them at daycare. Racism is apparent in the stereotypes used to justify the radical changes to the welfare system. News stories about the failures of welfare used pictures of women of color to illustrate stories of the “Welfare Queen” and to discuss the damage to society from single motherhood. Racism is also apparent in the changes to the welfare system that removes women’s rights of

choice and target illegitimacy. Time limits reflect attacks based on race, as minority women are more likely to be poor than white women are. Sexism is the most obvious form of discrimination in PRWORA. The new welfare legislation attacks all women, even though it targets poor women. Politicians, through their legislation, call women poor decision makers. They imply that women are unable to make correct choices, so they remove their right to do so. Male politicians are making choices for poor women; this is in effect an attack on all women. Any stereotype that claims women cannot make their own choices harms all women, not just the poor in need of welfare services.

PRWORA violates the rights of the poor. The poor are robbed of their rights of choice by an administration that blames them for their situation. The loss of rights for the poor brings welfare full circle. It is a return to punitive and stringent measures that do not reflect the real needs of the poor or address the root causes of poverty.

## Conclusion

Johnnie Tillmon said it best in 1972, when she proclaimed: “Welfare is a women’s issue.”<sup>1</sup> Poverty and public assistance have always been issues centered on women’s lives. From colonial days until modern times, poverty has been a marker for judging a woman’s moral fitness, mothering, and choices. It is evident, through the study of poverty, that classism, sexism, and racism are all embedded in assistance programs. Being poor invited judgment and condemnation, in early America and in the year 2003. Poor relief laws in colonial days, private charities in the nineteenth century, and federal welfare laws all contained an element of judgment based upon a woman’s status in society as well as her race. The administrators of assistance programs based aid on their own personal prejudices about gender, race and social class. Welfare programs are premised on prejudicial judgments.

Colonial assistance programs based assistance on a woman’s adherence to the patriarchal structure of society. Women who were widowed or abandoned had little recourse except to rely upon their town’s assistance programs. As historian Gary B. Nash explained: “law and custom hindered the economic advancement of single, abandoned, or widowed women.”<sup>2</sup> Early American society was gendered. Women’s place in the social hierarchy, firmly established, left them with few opportunities outside of marriage and child – rearing. Women such as Martha Ballard, a midwife in the late 1700s and early 1800s, were

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<sup>1</sup> Johnnie Tillmon, “Poverty is a Women’s Issue,” *Ms. Magazine*, Spring 1972, 111-116.

<sup>2</sup> Gary B. Nash, “Poverty and Politics in Early American History,” in Billy G. Smith ed. *Down and Out in Early America*, p.5.

exceptions in the patriarchal society.<sup>3</sup> Few women challenged the patriarchal order of early American society due to coercive forces that kept them in place. This is exemplified in Carol Karlsen's analysis of witchcraft trials in colonial New England.<sup>4</sup> Karlsen's book illustrates the dire consequences for women who challenged the established patriarchal norm for society.

Poverty programs in Colonial America reflected the gendered society and established societal norms. Assistance was provided based upon this societal norm and a person's adherence to it. Assistance programs were aimed at maintaining the patriarchal structure and gender roles. Colonial poor relief reflected the sexism inherent in a patriarchal society.

The nineteenth century poor relief programs were developed and managed by white, middle class maternalist women. These women were private charity workers and moral reformers. Their poor relief programs reflected classism and racism as well as the sexism of early America. Maternalist women based their assistance programs on adherence to the middle class values that they, as white women, embraced. These included the "Cult of True Womanhood" and "Domesticity." Historian Christine Stansell defined the cult of domesticity as "an imagined form of womanhood which had little to do with the actual difficulties of laboring women and their working – class neighbors."<sup>5</sup> Yet, the maternalist women remained determined to hold their poor sisters to the same standards they aspired to achieve.

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<sup>3</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, (New York and London, Norton Books, 1987, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, p.75.

Poor relief, through women's private charity work, reflected classism. Private charity in itself was class intervention as middle class, white women interfered with and attempted to improve working class women's lives.<sup>6</sup> Middle class, white women looked to their poor sisters and saw impropriety, poor housekeeping, bad morals, and neglected children. They then blamed these attributes for poverty rather than realizing that poverty caused these problems. The class difference between aid workers and their clients was insurmountable. By expecting that their poor sisters would quickly embrace their values and then climb out of poverty, middle class women illustrated their prejudice towards the lower classes. Classism was not the only prejudice in nineteenth century charities; racism also played an important role in determining assistance.

Racism was an important component in private charity's relief programs. The values of the white, middle class women quickly became the measure of all women. Ethnic minorities, including black women and new immigrants, would have to adopt the culture of white women to be eligible for relief. Gwendolyn Mink explained: "New immigrant women had to accept cultural interventions by maternalist policy administrators in exchange for the material benefits of those policies."<sup>7</sup> Adherence to American, white, middle class values brought assistance to immigrant women.<sup>8</sup> Ethnic biases forced immigrant women to distance themselves from their native culture to receive aid. African American women had even more difficulties receiving assistance due to racial biases.

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<sup>6</sup> Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, p xii.

<sup>7</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> See also, Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*.



For African American women, the middle class virtues of womanhood in the nineteenth century held many problems. In the post-Civil War era, as the South underwent changes from slavery to a free society and then to the Jim Crow culture, African American women suffered from the prevalent racism. The stain of slavery meant that the standards for black women had to be higher than for their white counterparts. Stephanie Shaw explained: "Although the public image of black women lay beyond their control, parents still expected their daughters to work to project a flawlessly upright appearance."<sup>9</sup> The popular image of black women was dominated by the myth of black promiscuity, which Shaw explained, developed from the time of slavery and persisted well into the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> The prevalent, negative view of African American women carried over into assistance programs that often denied them aid based upon their color. Joanne Goodwin examined records of assistance for Chicago in the years, 1911 to 1931. Goodwin's research illustrates the racism inherent in assistance programs. During the years of the study, "African Americans accounted for 4 percent of the populations and 8 percent of the families on relief, [but] they received only 3 percent of the pensions."<sup>11</sup> Racism in assistance programs meant that black women were underrepresented on the rolls.

The advent of federal welfare programs did not end the racism, sexism, and classism inherent in assistance programs. The Social Security Act (SSA) of 1935 began the federal welfare system, but did not end the discrimination evident in assistance programs. In order to gain support from southern politicians for the

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<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do* 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Joanne L. Goodwin, "Mothers' Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1931," in Anya Jabour, ed. *Major Problems in the History of American Families and Children*, 310.

SSA, Roosevelt allowed traditional African American occupations to be excluded from the retirement programs. Employments excluded from the SSA included domestic work, such as housekeepers. Domestic employment was traditionally black women's work. The Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program also excluded black families. In her book, *The Color Of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*, Jill Quadagno explored the connections between racism and failures in the welfare state. In regards to the New Deal programs, she stated: "The New Deal welfare state instituted a regime that reinforced racial inequality."<sup>12</sup> The new welfare state, developed by Roosevelt, maintained the status quo of racism in assistance programs.

The ADC was sexist in addition to being racist. The primary function of the new welfare program was to enable mothers to remain home with their children. The mother who received benefits for her dependent children lost them when her youngest child reached the age of sixteen, "once her reproductive and caretaking functions ended."<sup>13</sup> The message was that a woman's role in society was to raise children. Once that task was completed, her care was irrelevant.

Between 1935 and 1965, the ADC program (renamed Aid to Dependent Families with Children [AFDC] in 1962), provided block grants to states. The federal government allowed the states to set their own guidelines for assistance. States' governing rules for ADC/AFDC programs continued the trend of racist and sexist administration of aid. States excluded blacks from welfare roles by using morality clauses. "No-man-in-the-house" and "substitute father" rules

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<sup>12</sup> Jill Quadagno, *The Color Of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, 316.

prevented black women from receiving aid or removed them from the roles. Suitable home provisions and morality clauses were social controls used to maintain the whiteness of the welfare caseloads and to impose a patriarchal order on mother-headed households. The suitable home regulations prevented some white women from accessing benefits but they were, primarily, targeted at black women. Scholar Rickie Solinger described these regulations as “the formal, legal status of racist policies directed at procreating black women.”<sup>14</sup>

The years, 1965 to 1975, brought many changes to the system, but the underlying racism and sexism remained. The civil rights era brought attacks against welfare policies that excluded poor black families. At the same time, grassroots organizations fought against the unfair morality clauses. While recipients struggled to change the system, welfare administrators used welfare benefits as leverage to silence the civil rights movement.<sup>15</sup> Efforts to prevent the growth of the Civil Rights Movement through economic coercion failed. Welfare caseloads expanded during this time as regulations that specifically targeted and excluded black families were struck down. Court cases helped the process of removing the stringent morality clauses. Even with the termination of exclusionary policies, the racism and sexism in the system did not fade.

Public perceptions of welfare turned against recipients by the late 1960s and early 1970s. Stories of the “Welfare Queen” began to circulate as early as the 1960s; they invariably featured an African American woman who was cheating the system. Images of the “Welfare Queen” served to maintain the racist

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<sup>14</sup> Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> See Jill Quadagno.

prejudices in the welfare system. The “Welfare Queen” image also played on sexist notions by implying that a poor, single woman was incomplete and deviant without a male breadwinner. Classism is also evident in the images of welfare mothers that dominated media stories. It was the welfare mothers, who did not work, who were responsible for the heavy tax burden of the middle class. Poor mothers, particularly black women, were portrayed as wanton breeders with out of control sexuality. They were the cause of all of society’s ills, from crime to high taxes. Welfare mothers lacked legitimacy in society and were targeted because of their sexuality and lack of a male head-of-household.<sup>16</sup>

Politicians cried for welfare reform in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but accomplished little due to the activism of welfare rights groups. Welfare rights groups grew out of the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights movements. Women were the leadership of the activist groups and advocated for themselves. This was a time of women speaking for themselves. However, their power was short-lived. After 1974, groups such as the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) lost power and faded from existence. This meant that politicians had free reign to alter the system. Politicians targeted recipients for punishment as much as they aimed to change the system. The era of Ronald Reagan illustrates the sexism and racism in welfare attacks. During the 1980s, reforms to the system were aimed at forcing recipients to change.

Reagan immediately attacked the welfare system when he entered office. Reagan’s aims for welfare targeted the morals, values, and choices of recipients. Marking them as poor decision makers who could not control their own sexuality,

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<sup>16</sup> Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 179-182.

Reagan set policies that hurt women. Reagan used the welfare system to advance his narrowly defined “family values.” The “family values” platform was sexist in its inception; it termed single parent households “deviant.” Thus, only a family headed by a male breadwinner was legitimate. Reagan’s “family values” platform also exuded racism. The iconic “Welfare Queen” he set about to reform was portrayed as a black woman having children to increase her welfare check. The conservative focus on “family values” devalued mother-headed households while attacking black women on welfare.

The iconic “Welfare Queen” appeared in media stories several times during the 1980s and early 1990s. In most media stories regarding welfare, the accompanying pictures were of black women, giving the public the impression that welfare was a system that promoted black illegitimacy. These images supported public perceptions that welfare was a black program that encouraged poor decision-making. Media images also encouraged calls for welfare reform as they perpetuated the “Welfare Queen” myth. Yet, feminists and liberals maintained hope that the election of Bill Clinton would correct the abuses that Reagan conservatives imposed on recipients.

The hopes that welfare regulations would cease to be sexist, classist, and racist under the administration of Bill Clinton died with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996. Social critic Barbara Ehrenreich stated: “It was hard to miss the racism and misogyny that helped motivate welfare reform.”<sup>17</sup> Welfare reform was a racially motivated attack against all women. Racism was evident in the discussion

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<sup>17</sup> Ehrenreich, in *For Crying Out Loud*, p. viii.

leading to passage of PRWORA and the sexism was evident in the way its passage attacked all women's rights of choice.

In her lecture "Seven ways of Looking at a Poor Woman," Rickie Solinger explains choice in regards to welfare recipients. Welfare mothers are viewed as poor decision makers and who do not make the correct choices in life.<sup>18</sup> Thus, viewing welfare mothers as unable to make good choices, the government set about to make their choices for them. The Clinton and Bush (II) administrations practiced sexism by robbing women of their freedom of choice.

PRWORA included family formation policies. The government, again, defined family in a narrow sense, excluding single-parent households, same-sex couples, and other non-traditional families. The definition of a family as one man and one woman legally married and raising children together violates women's right to choose their own relationships. The family formation policies contended that for legitimacy, a woman must be married to a male-head-of-household. They thus restigmatized single parent births as illegitimate. The legislators who designed and passed PRWORA held that marriage was the key to a successful society; therefore those women who chose to remain single were deviant and must be forced to adhere to societal norms.<sup>19</sup> The sexism in these programs is evident as white politicians determined that women could not function as a head-of-household. Neither could women make the appropriate choice for marriage on their own.

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<sup>18</sup> Rickie Solinger, "Seven Ways of Looking at a Poor Woman," Lecture, University of Montana.

<sup>19</sup> PRWORA, "Findings of Congress."

Clinton's welfare plan focused on time limits for recipients. Time limits meant that a recipient could only access cash benefits for a maximum of five years. This forced women who chose to stay home with their children, to accept any low-paying job they could find. This was yet another choice made for the poor by the government. Time limits and work requirements that force a woman to leave her children for any type of work turns motherhood into a class privilege. While pushing single mothers into the work force, society promoted the importance of middle and upper class women staying home with their children. It is difficult to miss the classism associated with this reform. Poor mothers must work, while it is better for richer children to have a mother at home.

The Bush (II) administration added abstinence-only-education to the welfare regulations. This thinly veiled attempt to regulate a woman's sexuality reduced birth control options and availability. Abstinence-only-education programs robbed women of yet another choice in their lives: the choice to control their own sexuality. Gwendolyn Mink explained: "The TANF regime's various reproductive rights ultimately assail poor single women's right to be mothers."<sup>20</sup> Women's right to control their own sexuality came under attack through this new aspect of welfare reform. It is obvious that this section, aimed at all poor women, was designed with the "Welfare Queen" in mind. The iconic figure lacked control over her own sexuality and therefore continued to have illegitimate children. As always, this image was of an African American woman. Thus, it is obvious that abstinence-only programs were designed to control the sexuality of poor women, particularly poor women of color.

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<sup>20</sup> Mink, "Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State," p. 103.

Women, especially poor women, have lost many of their rights under PRWORA. All of their lost rights center on choice. As the government decided that poor women were unable to make appropriate choices for themselves, the choices were made for them. These choices include reproductive rights, choice of motherhood over work, the choice of companion, and the choice whether or not to marry. Robbing poor women of these rights of choice harms all women. Government intervention into personal lives never stops with one issue; it is a slippery slope that continues downward.

This paper began with the understanding that America, as the land of the middle class, exhibits a misunderstanding of poverty and disdain for the poor. The research covers the history of assistance programs from colonial days, through the New Deal and Civil Rights movement, and ends with the year 2003. Through exploring the buildup to the establishment of the federal welfare system in 1935 and the debates leading to the reform of the system in 1996, one question was raised; Do the poor have rights? Under PRWORA, the answer is no. Poor women no longer have the right to choice.

Assistance programs for the poor have always exhibited classism, racism, and sexism. They target poor women as unfit for not obtaining and living up to middle class values. They target women of color through stereotypes that portray them as wanton breeders trying to get something for nothing. They target all women as inferior and unfit without a male-head-of-household. Racism, classism, and sexism live in the government welfare programs.



Public assistance programs in the United States have come full circle. Several aspects of poor relief programs in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have returned with PRWORA. Colonial measures that kept spending on relief programs low included residency requirements. Residency requirements reappeared in the 1960s when African Americans who had migrated north applied for assistance. Residency requirements also reappeared in 2003 in California's welfare reform program. Morals testing was an important aspect of poor relief in the nineteenth century when private charities handled assistance. Private charity workers inspected every aspect of their women's lives, including the company they kept. Morals testing remained an important aspect of public assistance programs in the New Deal. States passed "morals" clauses that restricted women's companions and activities. Morals testing have resurfaced with PRWORA. New welfare regulations require a woman seeking assistance to reveal personal details about her sexual activities. Morality is also evident in the marriage promotion initiatives, which claim that only women married to a male breadwinner are legitimate. Home visits, once a tool of private charity workers in the nineteenth century are currently part of state plans to ensure the protection of marriage. Welfare in the nineteenth century was run by private charities. In 2002 and 2003 George Bush (II) allocated money to private charities to run welfare programs. Welfare is quickly returning to a program run by private charities and churches. Welfare has come full circle. It began as a punitive system designed to punish the poor; it was then a program run by private charities and churches; and in 1935 it became a federal program. However, from 1996 to 2003 it has returned

to being a punitive system to punish the poor and it has begun to return to the domain of private charities and churches.

The “Burger King Mom,” mentioned at the beginning of this paper exemplifies many women who are in need of public assistance. In writing about her, journalist Jim Wallis stated: “‘Soccer moms’ and ‘NASCAR dads’ have received much attention in recent election campaigns. But who will speak to or for Burger King Mom?”<sup>21</sup> What is the answer to Wallis’s question? Who will speak for the single mothers, the welfare recipients, the working poor, the Burger King Moms? Advocacy groups and the poor themselves speak out on the pressing problems of poverty, but they are only a small group of people fighting for an extremely large cause. Ultimately, the answer to Wallis’s question is, all Americans should. Johnnie Tillmon called welfare a women’s issue, but it should be everyone’s issue. All Americans should concern themselves with the poor, the racial minorities, the women – the “Burger King Mom.”

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<sup>21</sup> Wallis, “In Defense of ‘Burger King Mom’” in *Missoulian*, June 7, 2004.

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