



Women of Color and TANF ***(Temporary Aid to Needy Families)*** **Issues, Barriers, and Hindrances**

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Abstract: Women with children who must rely on TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) are faced with obstacles of limits to higher education, asset attainment limits, lack of childcare, and demanding 'work first' policies. Welfare recidivism depends heavily on the trade-offs between family and work that women have to make. The TANF system and conservative proponents of welfare reform focus on work as a norm for women and adopt notions of self-sufficiency through work as a means to eradicate poverty. Despite the value of this goal, this individualism overlooks that women who do not recidivate rely on other forms of subsistence, including their extended kinship networks and community ties. TANF undermines the usage of these community ties that people of low-income communities rely on for survival. Self-determination in these women is produced by promoting asset attainment, higher education, and use of community ties/resources. The conservative idea that work is the norm, work is good for families and work leads to self-sufficiency is not realistic for these women's lives. In this paper, I am advocating for the development of a social welfare system that acknowledges and respects cultural variation and that encourages collectivistic responses to alleviating poverty.

PREFACE

"What you gon' do? You're Black, you're poor, you're ugly, you're a woman! You're nothin' at all!" —Danny Glover, *The Color Purple*

The Color Purple has always been a favorite of mine, but it wasn't until I watched it recently that I realized the relevance. This quote resonates with me for the purposes of this project. Most often, the degradation Black women have been exposed to was at the hands of Black men and the rest of soci-

ety. But hasn't it always been Black women, old and young, sustaining the community? Haven't we been primarily responsible for childrearing and even the filial responsibility when men have deserted the family? Haven't we creatively and cleverly "made a way out of no way"? And all of this while still managing to raise children who can navigate a dangerously oppressive system while giving the impression that they are in collusion with it? So it was in the spirit of this inquiry that I initially began writing this paper.

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I recently had the opportunity to present this research at a conference and that experience made me realize the need to really share this message. As I have said before, this project is all about giving voice to those who wouldn't otherwise find one—letting people tell their own story for once. It is essentially my story and the stories of others just like me. So I wish to depart from that awfully dogmatic and completely dry style of academic presentation, and instead invite you to an exploration with me of self and of a social world that is often obscured. Here, although my thoughts and motivations pertain to black women like myself, these issues pertain, I think, to all low-income women who are struggling to advance themselves while maintaining ties to others and their communities.

This work in particular is a labor of love. There are so many things that I've always wanted to say, always wanted to express. I really feel like sociologists are dropping the ball. There are more than enough studies about investigating the social problems. We know what the problems are already. What are we going to do about them? So I'm hoping that this is only the first step for me. The beginning of a life lived in the service of disenfranchised people, a life poured out as a living sacrifice to the struggle.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty has become a code word for defective and immoral, and the war on poverty is really a war on poor people. The people of low-income communities really do not want to get out of poverty if it means disconnecting from their community of origin. Instead, we want to stabilize the community and be eradicating dependency and promoting self-sufficiency. Essentially, we want to improve the community, we don't want to get out of it and leave it behind. The government sees the eradication

of poverty as putting all unemployed and dependent people to work, any kind of work with any kind of pay. Additionally, governmental efforts often undermine the community ties that people of low-income rely on for survival. Essentially, in this paper I am presenting an argument against the implicit "culture of poverty" tenets that underlay previous reform. I do agree that welfare reform is in order but it is the structure that must be changed, not the people who depend on the assistance. Welfare is racialized because the focus seems to be on changing poor blacks into middle and upper class whites. Instead, I'm advocating for the development of a social welfare system that acknowledges and accounts for cultural variation by promoting collectivistic responses to alleviating poverty.

I will begin by reviewing the central perspectives existing today that frame debates about women's efforts to cope with poverty and survive with empowerment in the aftermath of change in the welfare system. Although there is much written about the low wages and the inability to get out of poverty, I wish to emphasize that change must seek to eliminate poverty and offer opportunity—but, to achieve this while women maintain their collectivistic strengths, including kinship and informal ties in the community. Here, although my thoughts and motivations pertain to black women like myself, these issues pertain, I think, to all low-income women, who are struggling to advance themselves while maintaining ties to others and their communities.

THE LITERATURE

There has been an overwhelming amount of research conducted about TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families), formerly known as AFDC (Aid to Families With Dependent Children). Most of this research supports one side or the other in a

debate about reform of the public welfare system that has been dichotomous.

On the one hand, there are the proponents of welfare reform who argue that policy change is in order, as there are far too many recipients who are unnecessarily dependent (Bok and Simmons 2004, Chilman & Cancian 2001). This line of argument eventually resulted in the reform of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) during the Clinton administration. Under the new changes, families receiving aid may not receive benefits for additional children born to parents, and the changes include a lifetime five year time limit and very specific work requirements. As a direct result, the nationwide participation rate has been reduced by approximately fifty percent. But of course, getting off the rolls is not the same as getting out of poverty. Cancian (2001) asserts that the ideological underpinnings of this prowork rhetoric are that work is the norm, work is good for families, and work leads to self-sufficiency. This is primarily the conservative viewpoint of welfare reform.

On the other hand, the opponents argue that reforms have been ineffective because rigid work requirements in combination with the time limits hinder parents from attaining higher education. Advanced schooling is absolutely essential to acquire jobs that pay a living wage. Furthermore, there are limitations to the instituting a 'work first' approach when endeavoring to improve the well-being and living standards of low-income families (Cancian 2001; Applied Research Center 2000).

The origin of the conservative approach is theorized to have developed from historical approaches to poverty relief efforts. Originally, widows with children and the elderly were the original beneficiaries of public assistance and out of this developed the social security system. Eventually a shift occurred where participation in the labor market and individual behavior/ability/responsibility was emphasized. As

a result, a sharp distinction between those who were considered to be the needy poor and those who where the undeserving poor arose (Albelda 2002; Mittelstadt 2001).

There are various trends within each camp. Research shows that as a result of access to low-wage jobs that do not offer benefits and because of inflexible childcare options, women choose to remain on welfare rather than forego adequate healthcare and the stability of their family. Furthermore, employment does not guarantee success nor does cohabitation improve economic conditions for unwed mothers; in fact, research shows that "welfare recipients see little increase in their wages over time" (Blalock, Tiller and Monroe 2004; Loeb 2001; Teitler, Reichman, and Hepomnyaschy 2004; Cancian 2001). There is a whole body of literature on poverty, ranging from cultural explanations to external explanations (Kunz 1996; Sherraden 1991). And there are other factors that determine the likelihood of one living in poverty such as residence in the South, residence in a rural area, the availability of jobs in the market, etc. (Harris 1993; Jensen 1997).

Community networks and 'othermothering' is noteworthy in the discussion of the additional resources that these women use to sustain themselves. In general, the research shows that extensive kinship ties and community networks are utilized to nullify the conditions that are a result of poverty (Stack 1974; Collins 2000). A particularly influential and well-known author in welfare research is Carol Stack, author of *All Our Kin* (1974). Her study of the African American community was one of the first that explored these interconnected communal relations in such depth. Unfortunately, her analysis was predicated on the perceived otherness of the people she studied and her study only further confounds and reifies race and poverty in America. Yet, her research is of the most widely used and quoted in the field. In much of the literature, there is an interchangeable use of poor

and black, both explicitly stated and implied. The major problem with most of the works that I have reviewed is that they are condescending and none of them are allowing the people to tell their own story. There is a gross lack of representation in research.

Regarding TANF and asset attainment, there is overwhelming support for the conclusion that persons receiving public assistance and being supported by social welfare programs are not able to get out of poverty because the system reinforces and even sustains the low-income status of recipients, in part by not allowing them to attain assets (Sherraden 1991; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Stack 1974; Massey and Denton 1993). Further, this disadvantage is historically ingrained in the fabric of this social institution and is based on the need for a perpetual underclass to provide cheap labor to the society. Welfare cannot disrupt the low-wage market activity and the policies are in collusion with this objective (Applied Research Center 2002). Therefore, the welfare system itself promotes chronic unemployment and poverty simply through severely limiting the attainment of assets in order to be eligible to receive public assistance.

The Welfare Rights Movement has been instrumental in causing the direction of social welfare policy to sway in favor of those who are affected by it. This movement has been documented since its inception in the early 1960s. A particularly noteworthy organization that is on the forefront of policy advocacy is Grass Roots Organizing for Welfare Leadership (GROWL). They are composed of more than 50 organizations and among their policy recommendations have been very influential with congress (www.datacenter.org 2002). However, the movement began with The National Welfare Rights Organization which is primarily composed of women of color who were recipients of welfare and these women were primarily spearheading the welfare rights movement, and are known for pushing the agenda for their survival needs

of themselves and of their children. Out of this movement came many smaller grassroots organizations that brought about significant changes in policy mostly at the local state levels, among them being the prevention of welfare offices being shut down, and rallying against the passing of more rigid time requirements (Katz 1986; Mandell 1990; Sampson 1990). Among those organizations collaborating are welfare agencies with child welfare agencies, various smaller national organizations, and socialist organizations to push the humanistic welfare reform agenda (Naples 1998; Ehrle 2004). The Welfare Rights Movement was an outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement because women were seeking individual and community empowerment.

COLLECTIVE STRENGTHS AND CULTURAL SURVIVAL ACCOMPANYING ECONOMIC CHANGE

Welfare reform and policies to promote economic self-sufficiency

Welfare reform aims to produce self-determination by promoting asset attainment, higher education, and use of community ties/resources. However, the question "Why can't people get out of poverty?" is an altogether flawed concept. The question, rather, should be "How can people become self-determining?" And the answer, in part, is education.

Persons living in poverty are faced with the obstacles of limits to access to higher education and on attaining assets. Education is a way to self-determination and if we can access education, we can self-determine. Welfare will never help that process, but instead often works to undermine the process of self-determination among low-income communities because it breaks down community solidarity. And

community ties and relationships are the very support system that men and women living in poverty rely on for daily survival. Education is *the* way of breaking out of the cycle of lack of self-determination. According to one qualitative study, women receiving public assistance demonstrate a willingness to comply with the work requirements and are optimistic about finding work, but recognize that without the opportunity to pursue more education or vocational training, they will not be able to find decent employment (Scott et al. 2000). Many recipients are eager to work and to improve their conditions by moving on the path of self-determination.

Self-determination is embodied in collective community organizing, and we find the embodiment of self-determination in the welfare rights movement. In this movement, women gathered together and then acted to effect change in policy rather than passively acquiescing to the limitations posed by policy. Instead of asking for charity, they demanded rights and thereby determined how their needs must be met by the system rather than the system deciding for them. Albelda & Withorn posit that

Contrary to popular wisdom, today's activism is part of a long tradition that includes poor and working class feminists who became active to secure equal rights with men, black and white low-income women mobilized to fulfill their community-defined gendered obligations, which included helping to sustain or improve the standard of living of their families and communities. (2002: 164)

According to Secombe et al., there have been four main theoretical perspectives used by more affluent populations to explain the welfare usage: Individualism, social structuralism (also known as the Big Brother theory), the culture of poverty and

fatalism (1998: 850). Social Structuralism is perhaps the best fit for explaining the use of welfare by women with children. This perspective "suggests that social programs and welfare policies, themselves, contribute to poverty and exacerbate welfare use by trapping people in poverty and welfare dependency instead of helping them escape" (James 1993: 850-1). This is consistent with my analysis of the system and the obstacles it presents to persons trying to get out of poverty. The idea of endeavoring to eradicate dependency is what inspired the reform. This is reflected in the document itself under the historical background and need for reform overview:

The major goal of Public Law 104-193 is to reduce the length of welfare spells by attacking dependency...[and is] based on the view that the permanent guarantee of benefits plays a major role in welfare dependency, [therefore] congress is fundamentally altering the nature of the AFDC Program[...]. (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Sec. 1)

However, the major difference is that most structuralists view the system as being responsible because it undermines recipient's ability to pull themselves out of poverty, while conservatives view the system as promoting dependency by allowing people to rely on the system without having to work to support themselves. Advocates and conservatives alike agree that change is in order, but the point of departure of the two views is who is responsible for this change and with whom does the blame lay—with the individual or the federal government. So then, the questions I pose are: 1-What does it take to help women with children get out of poverty?; 2: How do we get them unstuck; and, 3: How does one endeavor to lift themselves out of poverty? While the welfare system is the fo-

cal point of my analysis of the issue, it is *not the main issue*.

The new welfare law endeavors to end dependence through strengthening the family, promoting marriage, and emphasizing male responsibility (Section 2, Title 1). However, quite ironically, it implements a strategy that includes reducing or denying benefits to teen mothers, denying benefits to mothers who have additional children while on welfare, limiting educational attainment to vocational training, and punishing recipients who don't 'establish paternity' by cutting their benefits. In other words, the aim is not to strengthen the family at all but rather to stop poor people from having babies as quickly as possible and to virtually throw people off of the welfare rolls. There is no real way for these parents to stabilize their families without the prospect of gainful employment, and they cannot find such employment without advanced education, which is now impossible with the new work requirements.

Among the material I have reviewed, the general understanding, amongst opponents and proponents of welfare legislation, among activists and amongst those who are directly affected by policy, is that reform is in order. The disagreement comes with exactly who and/or what needs to be reformed. Critics of welfare legislation, activists, scholarly writers and the women themselves assert that the system has changed for the worst and will continue to do so as long as policy that is insensitive to women's care-taking role is continually enacted. Policy makers contend that people need to work, they need to get a job—any job—and 'take personal responsibility' for caring for themselves and their families. The women's and advocate's response to this is that they do want to work and they do want to care for themselves and their families, but the social welfare system is not enabling them to do so via the enforcement of inflexible (and quite insensible in most cases) rules and regulations, and insensi-

tive policies that do not take into account the real issues of these women's lives. In *They Think You Ain't Much of Nothin': The Social Construction of the Welfare Mother*, Secombe et. al insist that "recipients are predominantly women, and the needs and concerns embedded in women's real life experiences as caretakers of dependent children are not contextualized within recommendations to reduce or eliminate welfare (851)."

Community Ties & Their Hindrances

Much of what articles discuss is the implications of the TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) policy, and in very abstract terms. While they discuss very generally the reduction of the numbers on the rolls and make a value judgment about it, they seem to neglect to talk about the other resources that these women who are tossed off the rolls are using. The implication is that the resources the women resort to using are not necessarily better than welfare but they can't possibly be worse if the women are going back to them. But I don't think this is the case.

It seems to me that the hassle, the humiliation, and the stigmatization that they would suffer are not worth the meager benefits that aren't even enough for minimal subsistence. I see the reality of this in my life and in the lives of the women in my family. A friend of mine who is currently relying on public assistance as a result of an unplanned pregnancy is utterly disillusioned with what she's had to deal with. She is continuously shuffled from caseworker to caseworker and thus is never able to get answers. She also talks about being treated with contempt and with much suspicion as though she is lying in order to collect benefits. She often insists with frustration that, "It's just not worth what they put you through to get this little bit of money." And still, she is forced to supplement her income by doing hair for money, bor-

rowing from family, and relying on whatever else comes her way.

Many women, according to Hayes (2003), just leave the roles long before their time limits because they're tired of these and other kinds of abuses. When asked to what resources these women resort, the caseworkers just say that they have other sources, though many are illegal (34). In addition, I know that many of these options are far worse and cost them an emotional and/or mental price, if not financial. Some attempt to subsist even in the absence of healthcare for their children, many return to abusive arrangements in exchange for the support of the person who abuses them, drug dealing, prostituting, and a host of others. I know that if the benefits were not available for my friend and if her parents refused to help her, she would be forced to return to an abusive arrangement. In a situation like this, the welfare system undermines my friend's independence and that of women in similar situations by imposing strict income and asset limits, and by ruling out cohabitation with the father of the children. They are really stuck between a rock and a hard place, as the expression goes. More often than not, women are penalized for utilizing their community ties for financial support.

Unfortunately, the welfare system is not in the business of fostering self-determination. Instead, it insists on a one-on-one relationship of the individual with the bureaucracy that is more like a parent-child relationship. Because of the many rules and regulations concerning income guidelines and other restrictions, the result is that the individual's use of connections to the community are considered illegitimate. This process is contrary to self-determination because the only way people have ever gotten somewhere is by working together, utilizing community ties to first make themselves more stable and then to bring about reform. The reason for the cycle of poverty is that the lack of self-determination is cy-

clical and promotes dependence on governmental resources. This combats the notion that these people do not want to be independent and do not want to work. They do, but they are not willing or able to do so at the expense of their children or even at their own emotional and mental well being.

Education dually serves as a vehicle for individual and community empowerment. Being forced to work so many hours amounts to less time for school, particularly since TANF requirements hinder the flexibility of these mothers in pursuing higher education. In addition to higher education, Harris (1993) observes that there are two other productive ways to leave welfare through work. Either by obtaining gainful employment or by finding a decent job that will add up to accumulated work experience (323).

In order to get their education, these parents rely on support networks because the resources offered by the welfare system itself are insufficient. For example, there have been 4 billion additional dollars allotted for the childcare block grant (Section 1, Overview), and indeed this is one of the more positive aspects of the reform. However, the Area Research Center asserts that the grant is used inefficiently and really serves as a hindrance in most cases. Most mothers are not able to find good and acceptable childcare with their vouchers and many childcare establishments will not accept them because welfare does not pay them in time (Applied Research Center 2002). From my experience and that of friends, family, and coworkers, I see that we take care of children to assist mothers who can't care for their children and act as 'othermothers', a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins, signifying the role of women in the collective community who lend support. These are mothers, aunts and friends of parents who provide free childcare, cook for one another, provide transportation, give info, money, and any other required resources.

By the welfare system allowing individuals to attain education, subsequently, they are not just stabilizing an individual but helping to stabilize entire communities. One of the ways that the interdependence of the community is maintained is through individuals investing their skills back into their community once they obtain their education. There is an understood expectation that when these individuals obtain higher education, they always return their skills as a sort of offering to the community to enhance it and make it better. This is what is expected of them and it is understood that the only way that the network may continue to support its members is if it receives a return on the investments it has made in individuals. Furthermore, there is a certain sense of pride and fulfillment that comes with being able to help others overcome the same set of circumstances and obstacles that you did in order to get to where you are. If they don't do this, they face the possibility of being labeled, ridiculed and treated as a social outsider by the community and also within their own family. By my estimation, it's a combination of feeling indebted to the community from whence you came and feeling the pressure.

Welfare has been racialized over the decades and race has been conflated with poverty (Applied Research Center, 2002). We are all familiar with Ronald Reagan's invocation of the welfare queen archetype with several children who lives off of the system and buying expensive material items on the government's tab. Although it is understood by all that this is not a race neutral idea, but rather, it specifically conjures up images of Black and Latino women.

Oliver and Shapiro (1995) contend that a racialization of the state has developed historically, and is indicated by the massive wealth gap between blacks and whites. They posit that, "segments of the black urban community have come to make up the majority of 'that heterogeneous grouping

of families and individuals who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system' and who are euphemistically called the underclass (304)." However, and quite ironically, the complexity of it extends into intra-racial relations. As a result of this racialization, welfare has become a microcosm of the dissension within the black community.

What breaks up the unity, particularly of black communities, is this racialization of welfare because low-income blacks who receive welfare are perceived as a discredit to the race and are considered 'bad representatives' of the entire race which causes a schism to occur across class lines. Blacks who are more financially prosperous, particularly those who more recently experienced upward mobility, may feel justified in divorcing themselves from lower-class blacks and feel more in accord with American values. However, what is really happening is a value conflict between the collective and the individual. Middle class blacks are confronted with the demand to abandon their collectivistic values and replace them with the private values of middle class. Collins (2000) explains how this happens:

Moving into the middle class means adopting the values and lifestyles of White middle-class families. While the traditional family ideal is not the norm, the relative isolation of such families from others is noteworthy. U.S. middle-class family life is based on privatization [...] [W]orking class African-Americans who experience social mobility thus may encounter a distinctly different value system. (321)

So become isolated, cut off from the community after they leave the working class urban blacks behind in the city. And when they depart to the suburbs they take

all of their social capital and resources with them. This results in a direct challenge to the sustenance of these kinship networks that people of color relied on. Collins (2000) goes on to note that the result is that, "the emergence of class-stratified Black neighborhoods greatly altered the fabric of Black civil society. African-Americans of diverse social classes found themselves in new residential, school and work settings that tested this enduring theme of bloodmothers, othermothers, and woman-centered networks (321)." The welfare system is indirectly responsible for this rupturing of the unity.

The poignant irony of this dissension among Blacks is demonstrated in how the black middle class perceive welfare blacks in much the same way as a majority of White Americans perceive the black community as a whole. More often than I care to admit, I have participated in conversations where middle class black people refer implicitly to low-income blacks with terms such as 'ghetto n—s' and make vast generalizations about them living off of welfare, and not wanting anything better for themselves, and with a contemptible tone. I find it to be rather ironic that these same blacks are first generation middle-class people and only experienced upward class mobility through the sheer luck of getting a good-paying job that offered room for advancement and upward social mobility. Through these good jobs, they were later able to access advanced education and obtain even more gainful employment.

The mainstream media portrays all blacks as a perpetual underclass and conflates the classes. Yet there is still an additional piece to this value conflict. Those who remain in poverty often reject middle-class blacks and accuse them of forgetting where they come from, because of that expectation that blacks who become successful will use their resources to enrich the community and to give back to the community that produced them. They may be la-

beled a 'sell-out', a 'token', or an 'uncle tom', which are colloquial terms used to refer to people who are assimilated into white culture and who do not ascribe to blackness as it is defined by the collective. The terms also indicate that such a person is being used by Whites.

Financial Obstacles Presented by Welfare

Everyone should have a right to welfare but 1 in every 10 dollars makes its way to the welfare recipient (Funciello 1994). The idea is not to force people off of the welfare rolls, but to develop a system for an overwhelming part of the population that actually meets their needs and supports them, not one that punishes them. However, I think that if the bureaucracy exists, there is a vested interest in keeping it established: the persons who benefit from cheap labor and those who work in the system of welfare itself don't want to lose a paycheck or clientele. The Applied Research Center (ARC, 2002) reports "a welfare office culture that diverts applicants away from welfare and pushes recipients off the roles quickly, sometimes into low wage jobs, sometimes into nothing" (200-201). They also contend that reform has made it increasingly difficult to organize because of the "'work first, work all the time' culture that has disabled mothers from having time or energy left over to engage in political activism" (200-1).

However, in the defense of the workers in welfare offices, while there are those who foster counterproductive relationships to their clients, many of them want to work with the clients to help them get out of poverty but have found themselves defeated by the inflexibility of the rigid policies that they must enforce. Hayes interviewed case-workers that were dissatisfied within the bureaucracy, and "some even imagined those relentless and unforgiving rules as a

series of landmines purposively installed as a test of their courage and fortitude” and she concluded, “Everyone in the welfare office struggled mightily to negotiate a way through (and around) those rules and regulations” (Hayes 2003:96). I see another level of communalism arising here, a rather ironic one. However, not all caseworkers have their clients’ best interests at heart.

In addition, racism and cultural bias inherent in the system serve as a barrier for an overwhelming number of people receiving TANF and these biases have been ingrained in the system historically. Oliver and Shapiro (1995) cogently argue that the AFDC that was originally intended for poor white women with families became increasingly a service to women of color, despite efforts to keep them off the roles. This disproportionate use of AFDC by women of color was a result of the differential in earning power between blacks and whites. They further demonstrate that because of punitive strict low-asset requirements, women

enter welfare on the economic edge. They deplete almost all of their savings in order to become eligible for a program that will not provide more than a subsistence living. What little savings remain are usually drawn down to meet routine shortfalls and emergencies. The result is that AFDC [became] for many women, especially African American women, a state-sponsored policy to encourage and maintain asset poverty. (311)

The prevailing myth is that the idea of poverty is a race neutral idea but this is not the case. Applied Research Center (2002), in their analysis of racism in the welfare system, found that White caseworkers would often recommend jobs and other resources to their White clients that they wouldn’t to their Black and Latino clients—thereby

contributing to the other factors that hindered their success in finding employment and getting off welfare. Furthermore, their research and that of other scholars show that legislation becomes more punitive as the number of blacks and Latinos on the rolls increase. The interchangeable use of race and class in discussions of poverty caused any discussion about welfare to be associated with women of color. This racial bias shows up in the case handling of women of color (111-112). The ideology of the family ethic reinforces the differentiation between deserving and undeserving women by defining traditional or ‘proper’ women’s roles and the conflicting demands for women’s labor outside the home is the way that the welfare state controls women (Abramovitz 1988).

Lack of accommodations being made for the language barriers to second-language speakers in the welfare office serves as an additional barrier to recipients. Further, persons are unwilling to sacrifice their culture to go on welfare because of the stigma attached to it. Essentially, people are being punished for having an identity that is not normative and the extent that entire groups of people deviate from the norm (white, middle-class, etc.) is the extent to which they will not only feel oppression but also the extent that they will be punished by the welfare system. Race is an obvious divider within the welfare system as women of color leave welfare because of discrimination by caseworkers not being offered jobs by welfare-work employers, not being made aware of work resources, etc. (Funciello 1993; Hayes 2003). And I say, in addition to this, women are denied the opportunity to utilize their resources and forced into the most abject financial circumstances just to obtain the meager benefits that the system offers.

A primary concern for most women who must chose between work and family is childcare. According to reports from the Applied Research Center (2002), the jobs on

the market are not mother-ready, as most jobs do not accommodate women's responsibility to care for their children, particularly those who are primarily and exclusively responsible for their children. Moreover, the wages offered are far too low to support women and their families. Mother-readiness could consist of a number of provisions and accommodations for women with children. Among the needs of women would be improved maternity leave. Many women do not want to leave their young infant in the care of strangers and cannot find acceptable childcare. An extended paid maternity leave could partially reconcile this problem. Also, most jobs available to low-skill, low-income women offer inflexible hours and after-hour jobs force women to choose between working or caring for their children.

Concerning the pay that women receive, this can be a whole other challenge to developing stability for themselves and their families. Referred to as 'a living wage' by Applied Research Center (2002), women must earn enough to pay rent and other living expenses, buy groceries, obtain reliable transportation, and pay for healthcare and other periphery costs. They assert that "women's poverty in the labor market and their poverty as family caregivers are deeply intertwined" (140). They referred to a study that "translated family care giving work into it's labor market components—nursemaid, dietitian, cook, laundress, maintenance worker, chauffeur, food buyer, cook, dishwasher, seamstress, practical nurse, gardener [...]—and the weekly value of family caregivers' work was at least \$257.53 or \$13391.56 a year (1972 dollars)" (142). So even though they are characterized as such, women who are primary caretakers and do not work are not lazy! They are just unpaid for their work and the work that they do is undervalued. Applied Research Center contends that because this care giving is not perceived as work, women do not have access to a breadwinner's

wage, which refers to earnings that are sufficient enough to run a household. Furthermore, they admonish policy makers to "adjust our framework theoretically and politically in order to understand the impossible position of poor single mothers." They also assert that the welfare system's recognizing work and offering a caregiver's income would encourage fathers to do more care giving work and also would not cause them to suffer financial losses for giving time to care giving (144).

CONCLUSION

Above, I have delineated the concerns of the women in low-income and advocate communities by asserting that women who are living in poverty are seeking a way to provide for themselves that is not at the expense of their families or their personal mental and emotional well-being. The welfare system should be in a position to help them meet this goal rather than undercutting their independence. Furthermore, the system must take into account and recognize as valid, the extensive community networks and resources that these women access rather than punishing them for using them. Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes the complexity and the crucial nature of extended family networks in the Black community that women utilize to confront and reduce the effects of racial and class oppression (319).

The welfare state indirectly attacks the cultural solidarity of women of color and implicitly emphasizes the exchange of their values and beliefs for those of the mainstream is by promoting the EuroAmerican middle-class model in training programs such as family literacy programs (Fitz 2002). The PROWORA denies assistance to unmarried women who have additional children after their enrollment in the TAF-DC program and requires child support from the father of the child/children that

would be calculated into their monthly benefits. However this ideal of the two-parent dual-income home is not applicable to the situations of these women, despite the efforts of the state to force it on them. Many low-income women desire to be married but the opportunities are not available to them, and furthermore, research shows that cohabitation does not improve economic conditions because low-income men face lack of available jobs to meet their skill set, chronic unemployment, and still others just abandon their commitment to their responsibilities. Consequently, the women are punished with the denial of benefits assistance, essentially as a result of cultural practice and their ascribed socioeconomic status—two things that they have no control over.

Harris (1993) noted that women's varying strategies and techniques for survival are what sustain them, but that additionally that "jobs [still] play a more prominent role in the economic strategies of poor women than was previously thought" (408-410). Childcare constraints, lack of gainful employment opportunities, and punitive social welfare programs all hinder upward mobility (presumably because women must focus on short-term needs) and thus contribute to sustaining poverty. Recidivism depends heavily on trade-offs between family and work that the women have to make (408-410). Furthermore, neither cohabitation nor employment helps women to move out of poverty because they are still combining multiple income resources to subsist. Presumably inflexible childcare hinders the attainment of higher education.

Applied Research Center (2002) primarily argues "we should redefine welfare as an income owed to non-market, care giving workers owed to anyone who bears sole or primary responsibility for children (or for other dependent family members)" (143). It further contends that a shift from debating over "reducing welfare dependency to re-

ducing poverty and increasing family incomes" will produce more favorable results. I further argue that we must put more of the decision-making power in the hands of the people who are affected by the results of policy decisions to further promote the process of self-determination.

Women of color have employed varying survival strategies over the centuries in the post-slavery era, but always central to their survival was these kinship networks. Their cleverness and the ability to improvise have been their greatest assets, yet have been interpreted by society at large as anger and sassiness. Stevens (2002) cogently argues for the sassiness of black women who have been able to utilize these networks despite the barriers presented by the system, among so many others. She puts this sassiness in a positive context and offers a coherent explanation for it:

African American girls' [and women's'] genuine predicament is the parallel need for resistance and connection and the social need to develop bicultural competence. They must capitalize on the strengths of sassiness while preserving kinship ties and developing and sustaining connections to social ecologies (e.g., schools, churches). The inherent tension here is that outspokenness and boldness may not be seen as strengths. Consequently, negative contextual responses to such behavior may cause black girls' disconnection from otherwise supportive systems. (86)

Therefore, it is abundantly clear how women of color, particularly low-income women who are single parents, have risen to the challenge of raising children and promoting resistance while giving the impression that they are in collusion with the system (Anderson 1996).

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