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Welfare Reform and Women – Tough Love or Tough Luck!

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Welfare reform is a very much a women's Issue. President Clinton wants to change welfare" as we know it" by imposing harsh work requirements on poor women, denying aid to children born on AFDC and collecting more child support from fathers. The states are on the same, if not more, punitive track passing a host of measures known as "workfare", "learnfare", "health fare" and child exclusion, which reduce the welfare check to try and change the work and family behavior of poor women. The welfare reform campaign that is both misogynist and racist should send a warning to all women. Why is it a warning? First, welfare reform intensifies the historical pattern of blaming women for the nation's woes. Second, it is but one of a series of steps taken by the government to shift the cost of care-giving from the state back to the home. The others include cutting social programs, privatizing social services, and shrinking the welfare state.

Politicians from all political camps like to get tough on women and welfare to win votes. However, the welfare reform debate has yet to answer four fundamental questions: Where are the jobs?; How to pay for needed services?; How about the Children?; and What about the women?

Welfare Predominate on the Welfare Rolls

Welfare reform is first and foremost a women's issue because most welfare recipients are

women. AFDC is part of the 1935 Social Security Act. It aids children who are deprived of financial support due to the death or absence of a breadwinner. Given the prevailing gender division of labor, most AFDC families are female-headed. More than 95 percent of the 5 million adults receiving AFDC are women. The remaining 10 million recipients are children.

The Povertization of Women

Welfare reform is a women's issue because women are over-represented among the poor, especially if they are single mothers. In 1992, 35 percent of white, 49 percent of Latino and nearly 50% of black mother-only-families suffered poverty. The richest country in the world puts 16% of white, 39% of Latino and 46% of black children in harm's way. Poverty hits women especially hard due to low wages, discrimination and sex-segregated jobs. Women make 70 cents for every dollar earned by a man. As corporate downsizing becomes a way of life, even two earner households stay poor. If marriage cannot keep women out of poverty, divorce often plunges them into its depths. The standard of living of most divorced women plummets while that of their ex-husbands rises sharply. For women of color, poverty stems from racism as well as sexism. In addition to discrimination on the job, women of color suffer because white society deprives too many men of color of the chance to earn and support a family. Many thus end up unemployed, in prison or dead.

Deprived of good jobs and marriages as route out of poverty, poor women of all colors may turn to welfare for support only to find that in no state does the combined value of AFDC and Food Stamps lift a family of three out of poverty. Women are over-represented among the poor, single mothers and AFDC clients not because work often does not pay, but because marriage often does not always work out and because welfare benefits are too low. In brief, women are poor not because of gender, but because of the differential treatment of people based on gender and race that leaves women with the short end of the stick

Anti-Women Welfare Reforms.

Welfare is increasingly a women's issue because women are the main targets of punitive, anti-women "reforms" which seek to change their work, marital, parenting and childbearing

behaviors. President Clinton wants to require women on welfare to work after two years on AFDC. These time limits not only stiffen the work rules legislated by the 1988 Family Support Act, but they ignore the globalization of the economy, the shrinking labor market and the mounting number of laid off workers desperate for a job.

In the states, punitive reforms known as "healthfare", "learnfare", "child exclusion" as well as "workfare" are winning the day. These measures control poor women's parenting by docking the welfare if the children are too much of a truant or if they do not get their shots on time. Her child-bearing behavior is the target of the "child exclusion" provision which denies aid to children born to women already on AFDC. Even more sinister, some policy makers favor the fingerprinting of all welfare mothers as if they were criminals.

If Clinton wants to end welfare as we know it, Charles Murray from the American Enterprise Institute and others in the family values camp, want to end welfare altogether saying that it leads to non-marital births. The family values camp has not only resurrected the once discredited language of "illegitimacy", but defined it as the nation's number one problem responsible for crime, drugs, poverty and most other social distress. To end it, they want to eliminate AFDC, Food Stamps, and subsidized housing benefits. If this doesn't stop the pregnancies, single mothers will have to turn to families and charities or place their children in foster care, adoptive homes, or orphanages. Some states want to make Norplant, the long-lasting contraceptive implant, a condition of aid. Is forced sterilization far behind?

Clinton's welfare reformers broach the issue of non-marital births more gingerly by saying that parents should not bring children into the world until they are prepared to support and nurture them. This seemingly logical, thinking is potentially sinister. The problem is not about nurturance. We all know that poor women have a long record of nurturing their own and other people's children. The problem is economics – that is the failure of minimum wage jobs, irregular child support and low AFDC payments to lift a three person family above poverty. Does Clinton's team really mean that women should refrain from reproducing simply because they are poor?

The attack on childbearing by single mothers is both racist and xenophobic. Many politicians are establishing their conservative credentials by substituting the welfare mother for Willie Horton in the politics of race. Others want to deny public aid to immigrants, who increasingly are persons of color. The current diatribes against "illegitimate" children, "unfit" mothers and "illegal" immigrants echo Social Darwinism and the Eugenics which, by 1917, led some 25 states to enact sterilization laws and many pundits to blame social problems on the poor and foreign-born. Then as now, the belief that a flood of foreign-born immigrants was slowing the economy and undermining the American way, if not the purity of the native-born racial stock, was deeply misguided.

Welfare has been plagued by such moralistic concerns before, but many of us had assumed that offensive terms like "unfit" mother and "illegitimate" children and callous practices like denying aid to the children of single mothers were history. After all, in 1960, the Social Security Administration stopped Louisiana from throwing some 20,000 "unfit" mothers off welfare unless the state made provision for the children. In 1961, the courts ruled that Newburgh, New York's plan to cut benefits of unwed AFDC mothers who had another child was against the law. Intrusive welfare department practices known as the "man-in-the-house rule" and the "midnight-raid," designed to monitor the sex life of AFDC mothers, persisted a while longer, until they too were disallowed.

From the Tenement Class to the Dangerous Class to the Underclass.

Today's coldhearted welfare reform are justified by arguments which imply that women on welfare are culturally adrift welfare queens, who prefer welfare to work, live high on the hog, cheat the government, and have kids for money. Likewise, AFDC is accused of keeping women out of the labor force, causing families to break up, encouraging non-marital births, and otherwise inducing irresponsible behavior. The welfare reformers continue to press these pejorative claims despite years of research that show no persuasive relationship between welfare and a women's work and family choices. Moreover, the claims contradict the reformers own stated goals: How does calling welfare mothers irresponsible build their self-esteem; encourage employers to hire

them; or motivate taxpayers to pay the bill?

The welfare reform rhetoric also continues the historic pattern of blaming women, especially mothers, for the nation's woes. Before the "underclass" became a household word, social observers regularly condemned poor women and single mothers as breeders of "the tenement classes", "the dangerous classes" and accused them of transmitting pathology across generations. Only the means of transmission have changed from genetic inheritance in the 1900s to psychological internalization in the 1950s to cultural dissemination today.

These behavioral analyses of social problems ascend in hard times which expose the market's inability to provide enough jobs and income. They also gain favor when rapid changes in women's roles and family structures threaten the patriarchal status quo. By blaming women or other victims of social forces, behavioral explanations deflect attention from the root causes of poverty and other social problems. Structural explanations which focus on the workings of the political economy rather than the behavior and values of the poor have a long and solid history. But they lost ground during the 1980s and are currently out of vogue in public policy debates.

Welfare Put Women and Children In Harm's Way.

Welfare is a woman's issue because it makes parenting harder for poor women and puts children in harm's way. Politicians who pride themselves on keeping government off peoples' backs have no trouble imposing economic sanctions on poor women "to teach them now to behave." They push workfare, learn-fare, health-fare, child exclusion and increasingly fingerprinting, despite research showing that poverty, not welfare, undercuts healthy child development regardless of the parent work, marital or educational status. Work can increase a woman's independence and confidence. But the menial, low-paid, and often degrading jobs offered to poor women can have the opposite effect. Moreover AFDC may be the best and perhaps the only way for a poor mother to escape an abusive relationship, to protect them from drug-plagued and violence ridden streets, and to assure her children receive food, shelter and medical care.

Billed as a way to strengthen family life and restore family values, welfare reform over-idealizes work as a route out of poverty and as a source of self-esteem, while downplaying that

even employed women still have primary responsibility for children, and ignoring that poor single mothers do the job of two. They insist that welfare mothers work outside the home because other poor women dismiss the fact that the plight of the welfare mother reflects the care taking crisis of all women writ large.

The Caregiving Crisis

The mounting care giving crisis faced by ALL women underscores welfare as a women's issue. Lacking care-taking supports from men, employers, and the government, the major burden of managing work and family has always fallen to women regardless of class, employment, and marital status. But with changes in women's roles, the diversification of family structures and the sagging economy, today's families need even more social and economic support. At the same time, the government reversed 40 years of liberal programming and began to actively disinvest in the welfare state, which caused the needed services to recede.

This is not the first care giving crisis. The 1935 Social Security Act (SSA), which includes AFDC, addressed an earlier one. The Depression eventually forced Congress to acknowledge that market forces alone could not assure the levels of wages and employment needed by families to subsist. With this Congress launched the U.S. welfare state by creating social insurance and public assistance programs to sustain families in need. For many years the benefits provided by the expanding programs assured at least minimal care to families with sick and disabled members, retired and unemployed workers, and deceased, divorced and absent parents . Things changed in the mid-1970s, when the nation's leaders decided to promote economic recovery by disinvesting in people and social programs. Despite the new and multiple demands on families created by rising rates of divorce, non-married motherhood, female employment, and a falling standard of living, the government cut social programs, privatized services, and otherwise shifted the costs of care-giving back to individuals and families.

Since then, most two-earner professional couples, working-class households, and single mothers now worry about providing care to children, sick family members, and aging parents and about getting meals cooked, shopping for food, and cleaning the house. While the most affluent

women can buy the services they need, the overwhelming majority of women must suffer the stress of the double day. Very poor and homeless people worry if they will eat and where they will sleep tomorrow. Today's punitive campaign for welfare reform should alarm all women as a potential harbinger of things to come—for all women, even when they work, are still held responsible for the home.

Rising Up Angry

Contradictions may produce pain but also change. While austerity intensifies the mounting caretaking crisis, the need for caretaking supports has become a universal and normative feature of daily life, as indicated by the struggles for family and medical leave, child care centers, health services, and elder care as well as the turn to fast foods and flexible work shifts. Moreover, most of today's highly contested issues—abortion, child care, family leave and welfare—center on women's caretaking role.

Changing times have also sparked the formation of the National Welfare Rights Union (NWRU) and other welfare rights groups. Unlike the 1960s, this time around, some poor and middle-class women are having some success working together. The National Organization of Women (NOW), a major feminist organization, and the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society (BCRS), a national organization of progressive human service workers, which includes many women, have invited welfare rights leaders to address their national meetings and otherwise make welfare reform an organizational priority.

As a program just for single mothers, AFDC stigmatizes and divides women based on their income and marital status. Instead of just modifying this program, real reforms would address poverty as well as the care giving and the labor market crises experienced by poor and middle class women. One way to end welfare as we know it, even to end it altogether, would be to create jobs and design a program such as a family allowance which offers support to all families based on their shared caretaking needs. If feminists, poor women, social workers and welfare clients can join forces, perhaps we will find our way to a society based on equality and justice for all.