

Appendix

An Immodest Proposal

Rewarding Women's Work to End Poverty

March 23, 2000

Women's Committee of 100/Project 2002

In 2002 the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) will expire, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the policy it authorizes, will come up for abolition, renewal, or replacement.

In anticipation of the debate that will ensue, the Women's Committee of 100/Project 2002 calls for a broadened perspective on women's poverty, including attention to the special economic vulnerability arising from the caregiving responsibilities that women often assume.

General Principles

Women perform the bulk of caring work for children, elders, and dependent persons, both within their own homes and as paid employees. Our economic system undervalues caregiving work when it is performed in the labor market and penalizes caregivers when they work outside the labor market caring for dependents. Although caregiving in families is indispensable to the welfare of families, communities, and the economy, research clearly shows that this work exposes women to poverty and other forms of economic inequality. Caregivers' poverty deepens as they encounter additional hardships and disadvantages. These include:

- Low wages
- Discrimination based on gender, race, age, disability, and being the sole adult responsible for dependents
- Having a history of sexual abuse and/or encountering domestic abuse
- Lacking adequate education or skilled training.

When poor caregivers meet these hardships, they face destitution; when middle-class caregivers encounter them, they become vulnerable to poverty for the first time. This is why today poverty in this nation—and globally—assumes the face of a woman with children or other dependents.

If caregivers' poverty has a woman's face, that face also often belongs to a woman of color. Poverty in the United States is not color-blind. The debate preceding the 1996 welfare law made the color of poverty the fault of the poor. We insist that the color of poverty is the consequence of racism and related forms of discrimination. Accordingly, our proposal proceeds from the recognition that race affects the material basis for caregiving, privileging some women at the expense of others. We call for policies that address the shared vulnerabilities of women of all races, beginning with the particular vulnerabilities of the poorest caregivers, especially poor women of color.

Ending Poverty, Not Ending Welfare

As a crucial first step toward ending poverty as we know it, we call for social policies that recognize and reward the work of caring for dependents.

TANF, like its predecessor, AFDC, provides minimal assistance to those who are impoverished and have dependents in their care, but the arbitrary and punitive aspects of such policies prevent them from granting the type of recognition we have in mind.

We call for an end to:

- mandatory work outside the home as a condition of assistance
- arbitrary time limits
- child exclusion policies ("family cap")

To replace TANF, we propose a set of policies that will allow women to choose between performing caregiving themselves or purchasing high-quality

services for those who depend upon them for care. Such policies should ensure that caregivers—whether they are caring for family members or non-family members—receive just compensation and provisions for respite, old-age, health insurance and other basic needs.

AFDC and TANF have given special, but inadequate, attention to poor families, especially those with a single adult responsible for dependent children. We, too, are especially concerned with this group of highly vulnerable caregivers, but propose that support should be extended more broadly for all caregiving work.

A Caregiver's Allowance

We call for the replacement of TANF with a guaranteed income for caregivers of minor children and other dependent family members requiring sustained care.

This program would work like survivor's insurance (OASI), in that it would provide cash payments for family caregiving that would be administered according to national standards and would be disbursed at the national level on a regular, automatic and guaranteed basis. As with survivors' insurance (and social security) the caregivers' allowance would not authorize or condone government intrusion into the personal or family lives of recipients, including often racist intrusion into women's reproductive decisions. Those not now eligible for TANF would also receive a cash payment in recognition of their caregiving work, but the amount of compensation would be adjusted based on the total household income.

- The caregiver alone would decide how to spend the grant. For example, s/he could purchase surrogate caregiving services (child, elder, or other dependent care) and pursue paid employment, education, or training. Or, s/he could perform the carework herself. Or s/he could devise a combination of carework and other pursuits.
- As with survivor's insurance, there would be no employment requirements and no oversight, and the allowance would be available to any primary caregiver, regardless of gender.
- Each caregiver would determine for her/himself the balance of caregiving and other employment that is manageable and desirable.

- The value of a caregiver's allowance and the time spent doing caregiving work for dependents should be counted in an individual's work history for social security purposes.
- As an interim measure, the child tax credit should be expanded into a refundable Caregiver Tax Credit for all caregivers with dependents who need sustained care.

To enable individuals to make meaningful decisions about care, we further advocate the creation of high-quality, universally available, caregiving services, including child care for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children and elder care and non-custodial care for incapacitated dependents. All such programs should be federally funded and meet federally defined minimum standards that include adequate training, compensation and benefits for workers as well as mechanisms for input from parents, guardians, and those responsible for the individuals under care.

Transforming Wage-Work

Ending women's poverty also requires transforming the labor market—by valuing the work that women currently perform for wages, enforcing anti-discrimination law, and offering the opportunities and training for better-paying jobs.

Crucial for this transformation are an overall improvement in labor standards, including:

- A shortened standard work week. This should be available to both women and men so that both can meet their responsibilities for family caregiving.
- Effective protection of the right to unionize.
- A living wage—achieved through an automatically indexed minimum wage. This should be a universal right. The minimum wage should be set high enough so that a single adult earns enough to bring a family of three above the poverty line.
- Application of the principle of comparable worth, or equal pay for work of equal value. This is necessary to undo the low wages in female-dominated occupations.
- Affirmative action law must continue to combat gender, race, age and ability discrimination and open up higher-paying positions.

- Universal access to higher education and skill-building training programs that lead to economic opportunity and enhance earning power. These should be developed to prepare women for existing and future occupations. Education and training should be free and students should be provided stipends, along with substitute caregiving services.
- A reformed unemployment insurance system. This should cover all workers, including the part-time, very low-waged, and intermittent. All jobs should provide paid family and medical leave. Legislation ensuring paid family leave should be phrased in such a way that it acknowledges caregiving responsibilities as a legitimate constraint on the types of demands an employer can make on an employee (for example, requiring overtime as a condition of employment).

Related Programs

We envision additional social programs to enhance the quality of life of women and their families and to ensure that caregiving takes place in safety and with dignity.

- Broadly defined disability insurance/supports should protect those who cannot be employed, are not caregivers, or are not retired.
- Universal health care should be a right.
- Victims of domestic abuse require 24-hour emergency assistance and temporary shelter and priority in subsidized housing.
- Child support responsibilities of non-custodial parents should be strongly enforced, but only at the request of custodial parents.
- The government should develop affordable housing in economically and racially integrated communities and provide adequate public transportation, including customized service to remote, especially rural, areas, and late-night service to accommodate night-shift workers.

We will not count it as a victory if the status of American women is improved at the expense of women from abroad, whose economic and social disadvantages are even greater, compelling them to relinquish their own caregiving responsibilities in order to find work—often in low-paying service occupations—here in the U.S. We therefore call for the recognition and

promotion of policies that justly compensate the work of caregiving and improved labor standards for women across the globe.

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The Women's Committee of 100 is a group of feminist academics, professionals, and activists who are concerned with the relationship between women, economic survival, and the work of caregiving. We have developed this statement in light of our research and our continuing commitment to ending women's poverty.

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