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THE ORIGINS OF THE WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The 1966 Ohio March was a milestone for the welfare rights movement. Grassroots activists from around the country participated in this historic protest and established networks of solidarity that would sustain the movement over the next nine years. But rather than a starting point, the march was more accurately a turning point. Prior to the march women welfare rights activists had formed neighborhood associations or local support groups to challenge the unfair practices and policies of the welfare system—in some cases a decade before the Ohio March. Their political initiatives reflected the multiple identities and the issues with which recipients were engaged on the ground and were rooted in the women's day-to-day experiences with welfare.

“Welfare” can refer to any range of government assistance programs, including social security for the elderly or student aid programs or even farm subsidies. But, in most cases, when people talk about welfare they are referring to cash assistance to the poor. Over time “welfare” has become synonymous with AFDC or what is today Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), a specific program for poor single mothers. During the postwar period as more African American women joined the welfare rolls, AFDC became more punitive and officials instituted tougher regulations and eligibility criteria. In many ways, welfare became a program that disciplined poor women rather than supported them. In addition, AFDC achieved unparalleled importance in American political discourse. It was a touchstone for debates about government bureaucracy, single motherhood, and inner-city decline. These issues informed both the unfolding reform efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the political evolution of the welfare rights movement.

Welfare rights activists organized first and foremost against the dehumanizing and surveillance-based components of welfare. The welfare program aimed to

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regulate the lives of poor women, deciding how they should raise their children, whom they could see, how to spend their money, and when they should enter the labor market. Although initiated to aid poor mothers, in the post-war period race came to dominate the politics of AFDC, as welfare became more punitive and exerted greater control over recipients' lives. The welfare rights movement emerged in part because of this dramatic transformation in AFDC.

History of AFDC and Support for Single Mothers

When initially established in 1935, AFDC was known as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) and was part of the Social Security Act, a package of legislation passed in the midst of the Great Depression that sought to create an economic safety net for most Americans. The Social Security Act had two primary components: social insurance and public assistance. Social insurance programs, such as social security and unemployment compensation, were federally run, depended upon payroll contributions from workers, who were more likely to be male and white. Public assistance included ADC, Old Age Assistance for the elderly poor, and Aid to the Disabled. Public assistance was less generous and more restrictive than social insurance and served a greater proportion of women and people of color.¹ Unlike social insurance, which did not have income requirements—so everyone regardless of need could receive benefits if they paid into the program—public assistance was means-tested: recipients had to be poor in order to qualify. The federal government provided oversight and matching funds for public assistance, but states controlled eligibility criteria, determined budgets, and essentially ran the program. Consequently, ADC payments varied widely from state to state, and local politics, to a large degree, shaped the program.²

Through ADC, states granted monthly stipends to poor single mothers. ADC reinforced traditional gender roles of the male breadwinner and female caretaker because it offered assistance to mothers who did not have a husband to support them.³ The rationale was that if the husband or father could not financially support the family, the state should step into that role, so mothers could care for their children. And, although the idea that single mothers should be encouraged in their work as mothers prevailed in the political discourse, in practice, most ADC recipients worked or supplemented their monthly allowance, which was simply too little to support their children. Local welfare departments often expected recipients to work even though they saw them primarily as mothers.⁴ To deflect potential criticism, caseworkers made assistance available only to recipients they believed were blameless for their current situation, morally pure, and properly disciplining and caring for their children. Beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1950s local officials passed regulations to limit eligibility.⁵ These included: “suitable home” laws denying aid to mothers who bore children out of wedlock or engaged in other behavior that caseworkers considered immoral or inappropriate; “substitute father” or “man-in-the-house” rules denying aid to women if

there was any evidence of a male present in her home; employable mother laws refusing assistance to women physically able to work; and residence laws denying assistance to migrants from outside the state.⁶ Despite the limited benefits and strict eligibility criteria, ADC did provide an allowance to help some mothers raise their children.⁷

Patterns of discrimination in the program were widespread. Racial, cultural, and class biases shaped social workers' views of who was a worthy and unworthy recipient. White women, most of whom were widows or deserted by their husbands, overwhelmingly populated the welfare rolls in the late 1930s.⁸ Caseworkers expected poor single mothers receiving assistance to conform to white middle-class notions of proper motherhood and used noncompliance as grounds to deny assistance. Countless needy African American women never received aid, especially in the South and other areas where large numbers of African Americans lived. Although laws restricting eligibility were not race-specific, they were applied disproportionately to African American women. In 1943 the state of Louisiana refused assistance to women during cotton-picking season. Georgia passed an employable mother rule in 1952. Michigan and Florida passed suitable home laws in 1953 and 1959, respectively.⁹

Employable mother laws, in particular, were often designed to ensure an adequate supply of laborers to the workforce. They were directed primarily at African American women, who had a long history of employment outside the household. A field supervisor in a southern state explicitly made this connection:

The number of Negro [welfare] cases is few due to the unanimous feeling on the part of the staff and board that there are more work opportunities for Negro women and to their intense desire not to interfere with local labor conditions. The attitude that "they have always gotten along," and that "all they'll do is have more children" is definite ... [They see no] reason why the employable Negro mother should not continue her usually sketchy seasonal labor or indefinite domestic service rather than receive a public assistance grant.¹⁰

Consequently, southern officials routinely tightened eligibility and forced recipients into the labor market during periods of labor shortage.¹¹ Thus, black women's status as welfare recipients was bound up with their relationship to the labor market. Black women, more often seen as laborers than as mothers, were considered less deserving of public assistance than other women.¹²

Black Women's Entry onto the Welfare Rolls

Between 1950 and 1960 there were increasing attacks on and criticism of AFDC. Some of this had to do with the expansion of the rolls. The number of families on welfare grew from 652,000 in 1950 to 806,000 in 1960.¹³ While a substantial

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increase, this alone does not explain the outcry. Public concern about welfare centered more on the particular welfare recipients joining the welfare rolls. By 1960, women of color, divorced and never-married women were a larger portion of those receiving welfare. The 1939 Amendments to the Social Security Act encouraged this trend by extending social security insurance coverage to widows and their children. The Amendments moved “deserving” women and children, whose husbands and fathers had died, from the ADC rolls into the more respectable social security program, leaving ADC with a larger percentage of divorced and unmarried mothers. In 1961, widows made up only 7.7 percent of the ADC caseload, down from 43 percent in 1937.¹⁴

The percentage of African Americans on ADC rose from 31 percent in 1950 to 48 percent in 1961.¹⁵ This can be attributed in part to growing migration to the North. African Americans fled both Jim Crow racism and declining job opportunities in the South. Mechanization and other changes in agricultural production in the postwar South left many African Americans without work. Between 1940 and 1960, more than three million African Americans made their way from the South to northern cities in search of employment. Although many found work, deindustrialization in conjunction with widespread race and gender employment discrimination led to a disproportionately large number of unemployed or underemployed African Americans. In 1960, the official unemployment rate was 4.9 percent for whites and 10.2 percent for nonwhites.¹⁶ Those arriving in the North may have turned to welfare departments for economic support as a last resort.

In addition, nonwhite and African American women were disproportionately single mothers. In 1960 the official non-marital birth rate for whites was 23 out of 1,000 births. For nonwhites it was 216.¹⁷ Although single motherhood increased for all racial groups after World War II, white women becoming pregnant were well hidden from the public eye. They were sent off to birthing homes and their babies quietly put up for adoption. Black women had fewer institutional resources available. The lack of avenues for adoption, in addition to community values discouraging mothers from giving up their children, meant that unmarried black women kept their children and raised them at a far higher rate than unmarried white women.¹⁸ This higher rate of black single motherhood coupled with higher poverty rates translated into a higher ADC rate for African American women. Taking into account their poverty and non-marital birth rates, black women were actually underrepresented on ADC.

Nevertheless, the increase in the number of black single mothers on welfare caused public alarm.¹⁹ Using hyperbole and inflammatory rhetoric, politicians and the press hammered away at the apparent overrepresentation of black women on ADC. Increasingly, the politics of welfare converged on the stereotypical image of a black unmarried welfare mother who was lazy and dishonest. This image, more than any other, fed the fires of the welfare controversy.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s a welfare backlash by local politicians, the conservative press, and many ordinary white Americans exposed purported welfare fraud. Special investigative committees documented and ferreted out recipients allegedly unworthy of support. They charged that women recipients had several children outside of marriage, fathers took no responsibility for raising their children, and parents simply did not want to work. In most cases, the stereotypical welfare recipient was an African American woman. Further investigations into these claims, however, rarely revealed widespread fraud and found little abuse in the system. In Detroit, for example, a 1948 study revealed only two cases of fraud and in neither case was the recipient convicted of criminal wrongdoing.²⁰ Nevertheless, the investigations aroused public passion about welfare and planted in the minds of many Americans inextricable associations between receipt of ADC, race, immorality, and disdain for employment.

The press also highlighted the problems of cultural pathologies and sexual immorality. One investigator reported that 93 percent of ADC recipients in Washington, D.C. in 1962 were African American and that “Women with several illegitimate children, by several different fathers, were often found living with men who were bringing home regular paychecks.”²¹ Unlike when ADC was first established and financial assistance was deemed necessary for single mothers to raise healthy and well-adjusted children, by the early 1960s welfare for single mothers was considered detrimental. In 1963, an author for the *Saturday Evening Post* commented: “Today’s welfare child, raised in hopelessness and dependency, becomes tomorrow’s welfare adult, pauperized and helpless.”²² *US News and World Report* reported in 1965 that the rise in welfare rolls was due to the “mass migrations of unskilled Negroes from the South” and their “high rate of illegitimacy.” The increasing number of “welfare babies” would “breed more criminals, more mental defectives, more unemployables of almost every type.” The paper profiled the typical ADC recipient in Chicago: “A poor Negro girl: ... She is insecure, uneducated, unsophisticated, frightened.”²³ One official referred to children on welfare as the “children of illegitimate parents.”²⁴ Clearly the target in the welfare debate had become African American men and women who were characterized as not wanting to work, unable to properly raise their children, and perpetrators of social and cultural pathologies.

“Illegitimacy,” in particular, had become the catchword for evidence of the “degeneracy” of the black population and was justification for denying welfare to African American women. Popular and social welfare journals gave undue attention to the rise in non-marital births among women on AFDC and attributed this to male unemployment and female promiscuity.²⁵ In 1965, *US News and World Report* explained that as a result of migration, black men, unable to get jobs, abandoned their families: “Deserted wives, sometimes turning to any man who comes along, add to the high rate of illegitimacy in the self-perpetuating breeding grounds of city slums.”²⁶ Thus, the concern about ADC was shaped and sold to the public in large part by racial ideology. Promiscuity and laziness

became synonymous with black women on welfare. “Illegitimacy” became a code word for black single mothers on ADC and came to signify bankrupt moral values and community disintegration. White racism, gender norms, and assumptions about the moral dangers of “dependency” converged on ADC.²⁷

By the late 1950s the discourse about welfare, particularly among politicians and some sectors of the public, interwove race, sex, class, and morality. Local welfare officials and legislators responded by attempting to uncover alleged welfare fraud and corruption, limiting eligibility, reducing welfare payments, and putting welfare recipients to work.²⁸ A number of cities, counties, and states, including Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, WI, Los Angeles, CA, Cuyahoga County, OH, Wayne County, MI, and the states of Illinois, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania formed special units within the welfare department to investigate whether a substitute parent, or potential breadwinner, resided in the house.²⁹ Caseworkers routinely checked up on recipients, sometimes conducting “midnight raids” to ensure that a recipient was not involved in a relationship with a man. These unannounced searches of recipients’ homes violated their privacy and stripped them of their dignity. Caseworkers applied stringent and humiliating eligibility criteria to prevent women with alternate sources of support from receiving assistance. Under constant scrutiny, recipients had to prove the soundness of their character, their destitution, and, increasingly, their willingness but inability to work. Intake workers produced piles of application documents and asked probing questions about the candidate’s personal and sexual history. Even when recipients qualified for assistance, their income was not always secure. Caseworkers frequently cut them off assistance without notice or explanation or reduced their grants arbitrarily. Those getting their monthly check found the amount hardly enough to provide the basic necessities for their children.³⁰

The charges of fraud and attacks on the morality of welfare recipients were paralleled by cuts in monthly budgets. In Cleveland, Ohio, for example, the point of departure for the Ohio Walk for Adequate Welfare, officials instituted a number of punitive measures in response to an increase in black migration. Cuyahoga County, Ohio cut welfare checks in June 1959 by 10 percent and denied assistance to all able-bodied single men. In Cleveland, the City Council cut welfare, it stated, because of the rising number of relief cases due to “recent migrants” and increasing costs of welfare. Indeed, the proportion of Cleveland’s nonwhite population had nearly doubled between 1950 and 1960, from 16 percent to 29 percent.³¹ Eighty-seven percent of the AFDC caseload in the city in 1966 was African American.³² In May 1960, it denied assistance to all employable single women and childless couples.³³ Although welfare cuts were explained in terms of rising costs, in 1962, AFDC payments were well below other public assistance levels in Ohio. Families on AFDC received \$31 per person per month. Recipients of Old Age Assistance, Aid to the Blind, Aid to the Disabled, and General Assistance received between \$75 and \$80 per person.³⁴ Clearly, when budgets tightened officials turned to AFDC rather than other programs because welfare

recipients were an easy target. These increasingly restrictive ADC policies made it harder for all women, but particularly black women, to receive assistance.³⁵ While southern states had always implemented racially punitive welfare policies and had consistently pushed black women into the labor force when necessary, black migration to the North and the changing composition of the welfare rolls fostered similar reforms in the northern and western states and on a national level in the 1960s. These trends illustrate changes in local policy as well as the national shift in the discourse about welfare and government responsibility over the course of the postwar period.

The Earliest Welfare Rights Groups

In the context of a harsher AFDC program, welfare recipients in cities, towns, and rural communities across the country began to discuss, and in some cases demonstrate about, their day-to-day experiences with poverty, racism, and the many abuses they endured from the welfare system. Well before the Ohio march and the formation of NWRO, welfare recipients had formed local welfare rights groups in response to their difficulties with ADC, which was renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1962. They met in the cramped kitchens or sparse living rooms of poor single mothers. They initiated neighborhood groups, often informally, to share stories about life on welfare. These women—some with a history of organizing—reached out to other women in their housing projects, their churches, and their neighborhoods. The first welfare rights organizers spearheaded collective efforts that questioned unfair welfare policies and practices. Ruth Pressley, for example, founded Welfare Recipients in Action in central Harlem in 1964, hoping to create an “organized, determined, and united group to fight the power structure.”³⁶

In the late 1950s and early 1960s recipients in California, Ohio, New York, Mississippi, Nevada, Michigan, and New Jersey were mobilizing.³⁷ Dorothy Moore headed a welfare rights group in Los Angeles. The Welfare Action and Community Organization started in 1958 in South Central and East Los Angeles. Moore formed a welfare recipients’ union after the department mistakenly gave her a weekly check for only \$1.50 and she had nowhere to turn for help.³⁸ She described the overwhelming power of caseworkers:

The worst thing is the way [caseworkers] use fear. People depend on their checks so much that they’re afraid to speak up for their rights ... they are afraid to assert themselves and ask for what’s theirs because if they do the worker may threaten to cut them off entirely.³⁹

In 1961, Moore, along with other local leaders, established the Los Angeles County Welfare Rights Organization.⁴⁰ Shortly after that recipients in northern and southern California formed a statewide welfare rights organization.

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Sometimes the bureaucratic red tape of the welfare department triggered organizing among recipients. In Chicago, for example, “Stringent and inflexible rules of the system, interpreted and applied by punitive caseworkers, created great frustration among the women recipients.”⁴¹ In 1965 the staff of the West Side Organization (WSO), a Chicago antipoverty group, helped the women form a union, which provided mutual assistance and enabled them to “take collective action in their own interests.”⁴² By the summer of 1966, the WSO Welfare Union had attracted over 1,500 welfare recipients.⁴³

In other cases, the discretionary power of caseworkers prompted recipient organizing. An early welfare activist, who became prominent in Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW) in Boston, had several run-ins with the welfare department in the 1950s. Two caseworkers, she explained, “had very peculiar ways of dealing with public assistance families ... They visited late at night ... If ... you were going to have a male visitor, you knew that you were subject to visits during any time of the 24 hour period.” If the caseworkers suspected something, the client stopped getting a check.⁴⁴ The MAW member explained that prior to the formation of a welfare rights group, recipients in Boston challenged this kind of treatment:

Occasionally, [women] who may live in the same building or in the same block in the street would go together directly to the local field office and quarrel with the welfare office supervisor or they would move from the supervisor and go straight to the central office and try to get an appointment with the Director...This was in the early fifties through to about 1957 or '58.⁴⁵

MAW was formed when several Boston welfare mothers, whose children were in the same after-school program, attended the 1963 March on Washington and learned from other participants about the surplus food program.⁴⁶ When they returned home, this group of friends reconvened to discuss how to start a surplus food program. In 1965, with the help of student organizers, they formed MAW.⁴⁷ The recipient who organized the first meeting reported that “she had become very scared of what she had started, and had been filled with misgivings and worry that her children might in some way be hurt by the publicity.”⁴⁸ Despite the early hesitation, the group flourished. Three years later the organization had six branches in the Boston area with a membership of between fifty and sixty.

As is clear from the case of MAW, the civil rights movement was also a motivating factor in welfare rights organizing and served as an important model of social change. It fueled concerns about justice and equality, inspired people to question daily indignities, and provided countless examples of grassroots organizing to transform discriminatory institutions. Thousands of residents of Montgomery, Alabama boycotted the city busses for over a year because of

segregation and mistreatment. Student protestors sat in and endured verbal and physical assaults to integrate lunch counters. And throughout the South, many African Americans found the courage to register to vote despite the many obstacles and almost certain retaliatory violence. Empowering individuals as agents of social change, the movement gave a voice to the disenfranchised and articulated a moral code of human rights, racial equality, and social justice. Women in the welfare rights movement drew on the example, language, and tactics of the civil rights movement to develop a collective identity and form a social movement. The civil rights movement spoke to the women's concerns about racism and inequality and provided a framework for understanding their oppression. For some welfare recipients the connection was more direct because the civil rights movement proved to be a training ground for their later welfare rights activism.

Many welfare recipients and organizers who first became involved in the civil rights movement later joined the struggle for welfare rights. In Boston, prior to initiating welfare rights organizing the leaders of MAW worked on a number of civil rights campaigns, including a Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) rent strike in 1962 and a battle led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to end de facto school segregation in 1963 and 1964.⁴⁹ In another case, Mrs. Mildred Calvert, chairman of the Northside Welfare Rights Organization in Milwaukee, rooted her welfare rights activity in the civil rights movement. She explained that although "I was afraid of those kind of things ... when the kids decided that they were going [on the march] ... I had to go with them." The newspapers reported that the marchers "were doing all the bad things ... [but] we were the ones being fired upon with rocks and bricks and sticks." She read the black newspapers and started "seeing things in a different light."⁵⁰ This was when she joined the welfare rights movement. Whether or not they participated in the civil rights movement, the larger context and political climate of the postwar period gave welfare recipients both the optimism and opportunity to effect change. Inspired by the numerous instances of ordinary people refusing to submit to unjust, or racist policies, they began to agitate for themselves.

Although the civil rights movement provided inspiration, the indignities of the welfare system brought these women together and served as the glue for their social movement. Recipients became involved because of their difficulties with poverty, trying to survive on a meager monthly check, the embedded racism within the welfare system, as well as the reality of their lives as mothers. They encountered high food prices, exorbitant rent, and dehumanizing treatment by social service caseworkers. The meager monthly allowance and stigma associated with welfare deterred many poor mothers from applying for assistance. Those receiving aid were subjected to a bureaucratic maze of rules and regulations, leaving them powerless and at the mercy of caseworkers, who, at some moments, required them to discuss deeply personal matters and, at other times, expected them to be voiceless, passive subjects. By coming together and organizing,

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these women challenged some core features built into the public assistance program for poor mothers.

The Challenges of Welfare Organizing

For most people on AFDC, welfare was part of a web of social problems, which included inadequate housing, segregated schools, unsafe playgrounds for children, police harassment, and high food prices. The multiple issues in which they engaged meant that recipients in the welfare rights movement had complex identities. They were not only “poor people” or “welfare recipients,” but also black, brown, or white mothers, tenants, consumers, and community members. Welfare rights activists were involved in grassroots organizing, before or simultaneously with welfare rights, that addressed an array of issues such as civil rights, housing, and labor organizing. Many confronted the specific problem of welfare through multi-issue neighborhood and community associations.

The multiple identities of welfare recipients were exemplified by the way in which welfare rights organizing in the early 1960s was often an extension of other kinds of community activism. Housing was deeply intertwined with welfare. The economic security that welfare rights activists sought depended to a large degree on the availability of adequate shelter. Their poverty limited their housing options. So, many opposed evictions and gentrification and advocated affordable housing. In Mount Vernon, NY in 1966 the Committee of Welfare Families had been

protesting for several weeks against slum housing conditions that welfare recipients are forced to endure. Their action has included a sit-in at City Hall demanding temporary shelter and prompt relocation within Mt. Vernon for those evicted; an end to evictions for filing slum housing complaints. They plan to erect a tent in the center of the city for people already evicted who have no place to live.⁵¹

A welfare rights group in Waltham, Massachusetts declared in 1968, “Housing is a main complaint of most of the mothers, since many of them pay more than half their incomes for housing.”⁵²

Beulah Sanders, chair of the Citywide Coordinating Committee in New York from 1966 until 1971 and a national leader of the welfare rights movement, first engaged in the fight for housing rights for the poor. Born and raised in Durham, North Carolina, Sanders moved to New York City in 1957 in search of work. In 1966, unable to find work, she lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan on a small welfare check in a neighborhood designated for urban renewal. The urban renewal program, known among some black activists as “Negro removal,” sought to eradicate “slum” housing by moving poor people out to make way for better housing and wealthier families. Sanders joined the effort to reform urban renewal

policies and end the demolition of homes of the poor. She defended the rights of neighborhood families, many of whom were welfare recipients, to remain in their homes. In the midst of this work she helped organize a citywide welfare movement in New York.⁵³

One of Sanders' friends and another New York City welfare activist, Jenette Washington, moved from Florida to Manhattan in 1945 at the age of ten to live with her mother who had set out in search of work. She went to school until 10th grade and eventually found a job in a factory, but was laid off during a recession. She turned to welfare to help provide for her three children. Washington was always rebellious, someone who questioned authority and stood up for her beliefs. As a youngster this landed her in trouble with her mother, school authorities, and a judge who sent her to a juvenile home for a period of time. As an adult, her indomitable personality was well suited for the political organizing that marked the 1950s and 1960s. Washington organized for many years in urban renewal, housing rights, parent–teacher associations, and a community group called the Stryckers Bay Neighborhood Council, before getting involved in welfare rights activity. Well before the formation of NWRO she and Beulah Sanders started the West Side Welfare Recipients League. Washington was at the founding NWRO convention and served on the executive board of the Citywide Coordinating Committee in New York from 1968 until 1971.⁵⁴ Washington, Sanders, and other members of the Welfare Recipients' League attended the 1966 Chicago meeting where the Ohio march was initially discussed.

Both Sanders and Washington were part of a larger network of a New York-based welfare coalition known as the Welfare Recipients League. The League grew out of a grassroots storefront office, the East New York Action Center, started in 1964 by Puerto Rican activist Frank Espada.⁵⁵ The handful of people working in the East New York storefront in this predominantly black and Puerto Rican neighborhood organized rent strikes and protested inadequate garbage pickup. They soon identified welfare as a critical community problem and formed the Welfare Recipients' League. The League grew quickly, and soon incorporated twenty-four chapters in Brooklyn, with some meetings drawing hundreds of people. Throughout Brooklyn a number of other storefront action centers served as a meeting ground for welfare recipients. In another initiative in Brooklyn three nuns and two priests from local parishes assisted in establishing several storefront action centers in 1966. These neighborhood groups formed the base for the Brooklyn Welfare Action Center. By 1968, the Brooklyn Welfare Action Center had 8,000 members.⁵⁶

Many welfare rights groups in the early sixties grew out of community organizations. In Chicago the Kenwood–Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) had on its agenda, among other issues, education, housing, and urban renewal. In one campaign, for example, it opposed the Board of Education's decision to relocate residents to build a new school. After welfare surfaced as a central problem, KOCO started a welfare union, with recipients who were designated

“union stewards” acting as counselors and advocates to other recipients.⁵⁷ In early 1966, KOCO Welfare Commission, as the union was known, published a welfare rights pamphlet and planned sit-ins and pickets to pressure the welfare department.⁵⁸ The pattern was repeated in Louisville, Kentucky. The West End Community Council initially addressed problems of housing, education, tenants organizing, and recreational activities. Welfare, however, quickly became the main focus. Members planned “a series of workshops to inform local recipients of their rights; a membership drive; and a presentation of recipients’ demands to welfare officials in Louisville and Frankford in conjunction with nation-wide welfare demonstrations on June 30.”⁵⁹ These examples demonstrate that for most AFDC recipients, welfare was not an isolated issue, but part of a broader set of concerns.

Forming a Multiracial Movement

One of the biggest challenges welfare rights activists encountered was to build an interracial movement that identified the universal problems faced by poor women while recognizing the centrality of race. The welfare rolls in the mid-1960s were 48 percent African American. The welfare rights movement, however, was overwhelmingly African American, perhaps 85 percent.⁶⁰ Women in the welfare rights movement believed that racism was the scaffolding for the welfare system, which did not regard all poor people or welfare recipients as equal. Black women welfare rights activists articulated their political engagement in part because of the racism they experienced as AFDC recipients. MAW in Boston explained the different treatment of black and white recipients:

White recipients will almost automatically be granted special allowances at some offices, while black recipients in similar circumstances will be met with delaying tactics plus a full quota of red tape, and then will probably be turned down. Likewise, case-workers are accused of using their power to disapprove moving allowances for the purpose of keeping white recipients out of disreputable neighborhoods while black recipients are kept in.⁶¹

For most welfare rights activists, their race or nationality was inseparable from their day-to-day experiences as welfare recipients. Mrs. Clementina Castro, Vice Chairman of the Union Benefica Hispana WRO and Sergeant-at-Arms of the Milwaukee County WRO, explained:

When I first came on welfare, they didn’t have any Spanish-speaking case-workers at all...I was so shy because I had never talked to white people, because I had been working in the fields...Some whites can speak it, but they just know the language, they don’t know the problems. Latins can

understand better because they know, they have already passed through the same problems. They know our culture.⁶²

Welfare recipients such as Mrs. Castro saw race and culture mediating their interactions with caseworkers and their relationship with the welfare department. These welfare recipients articulated their problem with the welfare system as one of racial discrimination as well as poverty. The discretionary acts of racism by caseworkers and the systematic mistreatment of black and Latino recipients fostered among welfare rights activists a consciousness rooted as much in their experiences as black, brown, and white people as their status as poor. As racial identity became a salient and more frequent part of political discussion in the 1960s, welfare rights activists used a language of racial consciousness and voiced their struggle as partly for racial liberation. They developed an analysis linking their race to their experiences as poor women on welfare.

For welfare activists, however, a racial consciousness did not preclude the possibility of working in an interracial setting; and organizing in a multiracial setting did not mean a movement devoid of an analysis of race. Although they situated racism as integral to the disbursement of welfare they remained committed to interracial activism and invited people of any color to join them. Beverly Edmon, the founder of the Welfare Recipients Union in Los Angeles said: “There’s as many white people, probably a lot more, who have the very same kind of problems we get here from welfare. Poor people have the same problems, black or white. What we have to offer is good for anybody who comes in.”⁶³ Welfare leaders formulated a welfare rights agenda that attempted to toe a line, on the one hand, of addressing the racism of the welfare system and wanting to empower black women and, on the other hand, recognizing the class-based nature of their oppression. Despite the way in which racism divided women and operated to stigmatize AFDC recipients, it seems that momentarily and for a small group of women, the welfare rights movement was able to bridge the racial divide. The movement fostered an interracial organizing model that brought together women of different racial backgrounds around their common concerns of poverty, welfare, and motherhood. By welcoming all women on welfare, welfare rights activists suggested that racist attitudes, while pervasive, were not inherent.

Perhaps the life of Johnnie Tillmon best encapsulates the movement’s early organizing efforts and its complex relationship to race. Tillmon, an African American woman, was the first chairwoman and later executive director of NWRO, and was one of the most important ideological influences within the welfare rights movement. Born in 1926 in Scott, Arkansas, Johnnie Lee Percy was a sharecropper’s daughter, whose itinerant farming family was forever in search of a better economic situation. Although poor, she had fond childhood memories of her family’s self-sufficiency since they made or grew nearly everything they needed—clothing, soap, lard, fruit, and vegetables. When she was five years old, her mother died while giving birth. Her father and stepmother raised

her and her two younger brothers. Tillmon's father instilled in her a strong sense of racial pride and taught her about her forebears' migration from Africa and their history of enslavement. In Arkansas, Jim Crow segregation mandated separate public facilities for blacks and whites, especially in urban areas. But Tillmon learned to live with these publicly drawn racial boundaries. Moreover, formal segregation might not have been as profound in shaping her world view as the economic forces that impoverished families like hers. She observed white poverty first hand, and recognized similarities between her own situation and that of poor white people: "Some of the white people in Little Rock were just as poor as I was ... where I lived there was always white people who worked on the farms. They weren't treated any better ... than I was."⁶⁴

As Tillmon tells it, far from being "shiftless and lazy,"—as welfare recipients were often described in the 1960s—she began her working career in the cotton fields at the age of seven. She attended one- or two-room schoolhouses in rural Arkansas, until she moved in with her aunt in Little Rock to attend high school. Although a good student, she took a job and never graduated. For a short time she did domestic work. But when the family asked her to eat lunch with the dog, she made a pledge to never again work in anybody's house. During World War II she was employed in a war plant, then got a job in a laundry where she remained until she left Little Rock. At the laundry, an integrated workplace, Tillmon noticed little racial animosity: "For those of us who worked there, it wasn't about white and black. It was about green. Were you going to get paid at 12:00 on Saturday?"⁶⁵ In 1946, she married James Tillmon and had two children, but she and her husband separated after two years. She subsequently had four more children. Tillmon worked during and after her marriage ended and also supported her father who lived with her. After her father died in 1960, she headed to California to join her two brothers.

While pregnant with her sixth child, Tillmon moved in with her brother in Los Angeles. To support herself and her five children, she worked as a shirt line operator in a laundry—a job her sister-in-law helped her land—where she ironed 120 shirts an hour. She eventually moved into a place of her own, but found it impossible to care for an infant and five other children while working full time. She sent her six-month-old baby girl to live with her youngest brother in Richmond, California. At the laundry facility, where African Americans, Mexican Americans, and poor whites worked side-by-side, Tillmon advocated for better working conditions and wages. She quickly rose to a position as union shop steward, undoubtedly learning organizing skills that she would later use in the struggle for welfare rights. She also helped register voters and joined a community association, the Nickerson Gardens Planning Organization, which planted flowers, arranged after-school activities for children, and improved living conditions in her housing project.

In 1963, Tillmon contracted a severe case of tonsillitis and was hospitalized. The president of the neighborhood association, Mr. Garringer, suggested that

Tillmon apply for welfare so she could devote more time to raising her children. Her teenage daughter—who had been skipping school—needed her attention. In addition, welfare assistance would enable her to be reunited with her two-year-old baby who was still living in northern California with her brother. Imbued with negative ideas about welfare, she hesitated, but eventually agreed because of concern for her children.

Tillmon was struck by the differences between her life as a recipient and as a working woman. Caseworkers inventoried Tillmon's refrigerator, questioned such decisions as purchasing a television, and provided her with a welfare budget that outlined how she should spend her money. She contrasted this unrelenting supervision to her relative independence as a worker: "[W]hen I left my job in the evening. I was through until the next morning. And on the weekend I didn't have no one peeping and peering, telling me what to do or what I couldn't do."⁶⁶ The policing of her intimate life angered Tillmon. She later recounted: "When I was working every day, if I wanted to have male company, then I had male company. But when you're on welfare, you can't have too much male company."⁶⁷

Just eight months after getting on welfare, Tillmon began to organize her fellow recipients. She and five of her friends surreptitiously obtained a list of all Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) recipients in the housing project where they lived. They sent out letters asking the women to come to a meeting to discuss their lease and grant. Three hundred people showed up to the first meeting.⁶⁸ In August 1963, the Los Angeles-based Aid to Needy Children (ANC) Mothers Anonymous opened an office staffed by welfare recipients to help people who had been cut off from assistance or had other welfare problems. As Tillmon explained, her goal was "to be independent and if you weren't independent, to be treated with dignity."⁶⁹

Tillmon's life, in many ways, reflects many of the important themes in early welfare rights organizing. She had a long history of employment and only went on welfare when it seemed impossible to combine work and mothering. Although she engaged in activism previously, the humiliation she experienced as a welfare recipient prompted her to begin organizing a local welfare rights group. And despite her strong racial identity, economic hardship enabled her to recognize how poverty crossed racial lines.

Conclusion

Although these women came from different backgrounds, lived in different regions of the country, and had different social networks, they all had one thing in common: they were recipients of AFDC. Whatever particular problems recipients encountered with welfare, uniting to address them was tremendously empowering. Collectively, welfare recipients could more effectively navigate the welfare bureaucracy, challenge caseworkers, share information, or simply support

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one another. Welfare rights activity empowered recipients, most of whom had silently suffered the humiliation of being on welfare. Sharing experiences taught them that their problems were not exceptional; but that abuse and arbitrary treatment were a systematic part of AFDC, designed to discourage them from being on welfare or to prevent them from knowing and asserting their rights. The very act of coming together challenged the stigma long associated with AFDC and embodied the idea that welfare was not charity, but a right. Many women on AFDC, for the first time, publicly identified and spoke about their experiences as welfare recipients.

AFDC recipients often coalesced as a result of friendships or connections to a neighborhood association. These kitchen-table discussions enabled recipients to share experiences about the indignities of the welfare system, the first step in the formation of local welfare rights organizations. Through these discussions people came to believe that they should not have to be demeaned in order to receive a welfare check, that the grant should be enough for them to live decently, and that they had rights that ought to be protected. By meeting to talk about their problems as welfare recipients and turning social networks into political ones, these women embarked on a process that ultimately led them to challenge the rules and regulations governing their lives.

Local organizing was not widespread before the emergence of a national movement in 1966. But this early agitation and welfare recipients' initiative is an important part of the story of how the welfare rights movement emerged. Its existence demonstrates that the impetus for the movement lay not with civil rights activists and middle-class organizers but with the daily experiences of welfare recipients and their belief that they could make gains—a belief no doubt influenced by the liberal political climate and the example of other social movements. The heart of the movement comprised largely poor, uneducated, single black mothers who were, as former sharecropper and civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer said, “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

If it were not for the prior organizing by welfare rights activists, the June 1966 nationwide march could not have been pulled off. Local communities would not have been prepared to participate. But the success of the 1966 march also illuminated the benefits of local groups cooperating and connecting with one another. And that watershed moment set them on a course of establishing the National Welfare Rights Organization. NWRO brought together local grass-roots activists and middle-class allies to transform fledgling neighborhood welfare rights groups into a national political movement.