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MOTHERHOOD AND THE MAKING OF WELFARE POLICY

NWRO held its first national convention in August 1967 in Washington D.C. It did so deliberately. Washington, of course, was the home of P/RAC, where Wiley and his staff were based. But, more importantly, that summer Congressional representatives were in the throes of discussing and debating new welfare regulations and NWRO intended to weigh in. NWRO used its first national convention as an opportunity to express its opposition to the proposed amendments to AFDC. Welfare recipients were most disturbed by the mandatory work requirements that Congress was considering. Proponents of the work requirements believed that black women were lazy and promiscuous and needed to be disciplined.¹ Women in the welfare rights movement framed their opposition to the work requirements by making a moral claim for assistance as mothers. They fought for their right to stay home and care for their children, enter or reject intimate relationships, and to legitimate their status as single mothers. Their position was very much at odds with the larger discourse of welfare reform and with many of their middle-class allies within the welfare rights movement, who opposed the work requirements for different reasons. Nevertheless, welfare rights activists' intervention in the debate about welfare and articulation of their needs is an important indication of the contestation of welfare policy.

The welfare rights movement's participation in the 1967 welfare debates is one example of how the movement sought to engage, reshape, and redefine the meaning of welfare. Recipients did this through grassroots campaigns for higher monthly benefits and protection of their civil rights and also through demands for participation and representation—suggesting that welfare policy cannot and should not be crafted without input from those people most directly affected. The campaign around the welfare amendments illustrated both the strengths and weaknesses of NWRO speaking “for” welfare recipients. The weaknesses

became most obvious when staff members, shortly after the passage of the bill, signed a government contract to help implement the new work requirements. NWRÖ's lobbying effort revealed differences and divisions within the organization—not about whether recipients should have a voice—but whose voice would represent them and what that voice would say.

The Poor and Policymaking

In the 1960s, recipients engaged in a number of campaigns to transform the meaning of welfare on their own terms. The welfare system did not function only in the interests of the powerful to control and regulate the less powerful. Nor did the poor have complete freedom to shape it. The welfare rights movement's campaigns demonstrate that the meaning of welfare was contested terrain. Public assistance to the poor had always been a site of struggle.² This occurred in the day-to-day battles between caseworker and client. Clients may have reshuffled their budget categories to reflect their needs in a way that caseworkers were unaware and may not have approved of. Occasionally, they might have earned unreported income, or accepted money from family members or ex-husbands. Or they could have turned down job opportunities as a way to spend more time with their children. Welfare recipients employed these strategies to resist constricting rules and regulations and to make the welfare program work in their interests.

With the emergence of the welfare rights movement, the day-to-day battles continued, but opposition to the dehumanizing regulatory aspects of welfare was also more overt. Sometimes, as with demands for special minimum-standards grants from caseworkers, which recipients were legally entitled to, activists organized on terms set by welfare departments. In other ways, such as when they insisted on the right to be involved in intimate relationships, women on welfare defined their needs and the nature of their claims. They also demanded a role in the formulation of welfare policy. Welfare policy was an evolving process. As welfare activists organized and found strength in numbers, they questioned decisions by caseworkers about their monthly budget and standard of living. They rejected anything tainted of charity, made claims as mothers, and sought to make their own and their children's lives more comfortable. By speaking up and speaking out, welfare recipients transformed a political discourse that silenced and marginalized poor black women on welfare.³

Members of the welfare rights movement demanded participation of the poor and welfare recipients in both welfare policy and electoral politics. In the 1960s, democratic participation was a broader concept than simply voting, placing a representative on a board, or submitting a proposal for reform. Many grassroots groups organized to participate in political institutions, community boards, and policymaking bodies. Welfare rights activists hoped to be included in the policymaking process as a group with special concerns; to be recognized as a

welfare recipients challenged their social/political/economic marginalization. As black feminist scholar bell hooks suggests, the very act of speaking out begins a process of political empowerment.¹⁰ From this perspective, participation was an act of political resistance that enabled welfare recipients to alter a political landscape that silenced and rendered them powerless.¹¹

Including the poor in policymaking was not always successful and, even when it was, the question loomed of exactly how much power and influence a few welfare recipients had. Welfare administrators sometimes placated protesters by giving them nominal positions without real power or influence. Or, they encouraged recipient participation as a way to defuse political mobilization. An aide to the governor of Massachusetts suggested that the state recognized Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW), a welfare rights group, and its members, who “have been brought into the system via the appointment of [a welfare recipient] to the State Advisory Board” and no longer have a power base.¹² In this case, the real authority to make decisions lay with the welfare department and not the clients.

Nevertheless, including the poor in decision making was a watershed development in the history of social welfare. Prior to the 1960s there had been no precedent to seek recipient participation. Caseworkers and administrators rarely recognized recipients as active agents. The 1962 Amendments to the Social Security Act, however, included a provision for local welfare centers to create advisory committees to improve communication between welfare centers and clients. In most cases, administrators only formed advisory committees after clients began to organize as a way to either preempt or undermine their political organizing. In New York City, for example, advisory committees were set up after recipients formed a citywide WRO.¹³ So, the impetus for recipient participation in policymaking came from the welfare rights movement. As scholar Neil Gilbert summed up:

Over the past fifteen years a significant increase in client–group–member participation on governing boards of public and private nonprofit social welfare agencies has reinforced the mission and capacity of these bodies to represent the varied interests of the community. This marked change in board composition was perhaps the most important legacy of the citizen participation movements of the 1960s. One might almost say that those movements fashioned a new norm which mandates client–group representation on social welfare agency boards.¹⁴

An OEO official similarly pointed out how participation of the poor transformed welfare policy:

The concept of participation in program operation and decision making by the resident of the target areas, thought to be completely unworkable,

services, the same opportunities as other children.”²¹ The needs of children were a primary issue for many women joining the welfare rights movement.

Lois Walker, a member of the Rockbridge County WRO in Virginia, understood her welfare rights activity in terms of quality of care for her children. Several of her children had health problems including a son with eczema who needed oil baths twice a day, a nearly blind daughter who needed close supervision, and an epileptic son who required medication daily. She explained:

I was working at the time I became a member because the Welfare Department had really forced me to leave my five children with just any unreliable babysitter...I was told if I didn't work my children would be taken away from me. So by being in the group I learned my rights by being an ADC mother, and I am constantly fighting for the beneficial changes that would improve the living conditions for both me and my children.²²

Ethel Dotson, participant in the Richmond, California WRO and a Northern California representative to the NCC, explained her situation. Working until she became pregnant with her first child, she initially drew unemployment and then in 1965 started receiving welfare. She recounted:

I had seen a lot of kids where the parents worked and they had babysitters and the kids would end up calling the babysitter 'momma.' And calling mother something else. And I stayed at home and made sure I did not work for at least two years, so that my son, you know, we had our time together with me raising him. So, he was calling me 'momma' and not the babysitter momma.²³

The welfare rights movement's claims to motherhood was a critical intervention in the political debate about welfare at a time when welfare mothers, and black welfare mothers in particular, were under attack. It attempted to redirect the conversation away from lazy and irresponsible AFDC recipients; away from the question of employment of welfare recipients; and away from the so-called “crisis of the black family” that had come to dominate social science research.

The Black Family and Welfare

In the 1960s, the black family became a subject of scholarly interest and national concern. A plethora of articles, studies, and conferences examined the rising number of single parents, relations between black men and women, and cultural traits of African Americans. This focus on the black family, which eventually came to be defined as a “crisis,” forged two major concerns on the domestic agenda—racism and poverty. The concentration of poor black people in urban areas, the increasing number of black women on welfare, as well as protests and

demonstrations by civil rights activists and welfare recipients highlighted the problem of black poverty. Academics explained the prevalence of poverty among African Americans by looking at patterns of racism and how this shaped characteristics of the black family.²⁴ Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, for example, in *The Mark of Oppression* outlined the psychological and cultural damage caused by racial discrimination. Other scholars, such as Kenneth Clark in *Dark Ghetto* and Lee Rainwater in *Behind Ghetto Walls*, examined structural barriers to economic success for urban African Americans and the resulting “pathological” behavior. Pathology, in most cases, was defined by male unemployment and female-headed families. So, even if the point of departure was structural economic forces, many of these theorists concluded that the black family was damaged. Like the antipoverty researchers, they resolved to find work for men and reestablish the two-parent household.

Some analysts pointed to the rising number of black welfare recipients as one of the most reliable indicators of the widespread problem of poverty and racism. The best-known study to connect welfare, poverty, and race was *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Johnson. Published in 1965, the *Moynihan Report*, as it is more popularly known, argued that “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community.” Moynihan attributed the disproportionate number of black single parent families, which he called a “tangle of pathology” to the “matriarchal” black family structure. A long history of slavery, exploitation, racism, and unemployment led to a high divorce rate, male desertion, a large number of “illegitimate” children, and a rapid growth in AFDC families. The solution, Moynihan claimed, was to establish a stable black family structure.²⁵

The Moynihan Report reflected a “culture of poverty” thesis that gained currency in the 1960s. The culture of poverty argument attributed the persistence of poverty to familial and cultural traits within particular communities. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis first popularized the term in the early 1960s in his writings about impoverished communities in Mexico and Puerto Rico. Lewis argued that among his subjects, poverty had become a way of life, passed from generation to generation through the cultural transmission of a series of traits: the lack of a work ethic, resignation, dependence, lack of impulse control, and the inability to delay gratification, among others.²⁶ In some distant past, such traits developed in response to prolonged economic deprivation, but Lewis argued that these traits now prevented individuals in these communities from escaping poverty. In other words, culture perpetuated—even caused—poverty. Of course, culture of poverty arguments failed to take into account the complex reasons for the persistence of poverty, including residential segregation, racially discriminatory hiring policies, and inadequate schools. By narrowly focusing on one issue—personal behavior—culture of poverty theorists missed the larger picture of why poverty exists and, moreover, assumed that culture is an attribute

“passed on” generationally rather than something created and crafted in a particular historical moment.

The *Moynihan Report* and its culture of poverty argument had a profound impact on welfare policy. It ultimately reinforced welfare’s racial stigma and proved to be invaluable to critics and reformers of welfare policy. His analysis that the “deteriorating” black family, i.e. single motherhood, was the source of many problems in the black community fueled criticism of AFDC, enabling conservative and liberal politicians and policymakers to demand a retrenchment in the welfare state. They argued that assistance from the government discourages two-parent families, promotes out-of-wedlock births, gives fathers little incentive to pay child support, and, according to Moynihan’s logic, leads to myriad other social and economic problems. These critics concluded that poor women should not have access to a source of income independent of men. Strengthening age-old beliefs about why poor single mothers should not get government assistance, the *Moynihan Report* also cemented the issue of race to welfare and single-parent families in a way that made it difficult to talk about one without the others.²⁷ Moynihan’s report shifted the debate about urban poverty from structure and economics to culture and values. Although Moynihan suggested expanding employment opportunities for black men, his emphasis on black family cultural practices overshadowed his other points. The ensuing debate centered on changing the “domineering” position of black women, bringing black men back into the household, and ending the “cycle of poverty.”

Reclaiming Black Families

George Wiley, like most black leaders of the time, was outraged by the *Moynihan Report*. He questioned whether the patterns of family breakdown that Moynihan identified pertained only to the black family. He argued that if statistics of single parenthood were broken down by race and income, the same trends could be applied to white families as well.²⁸ He suggested that poverty, not black culture, explained high rates of single parenthood. Like countless others, Wiley challenged Moynihan’s focus on race rather than income to explain the deterioration of two-parent families. He objected to Moynihan’s characterization of the black family as “matriarchal” but did not dispute the dubious link between matriarchy and social pathology.

Like Wiley and Moynihan, most people in the NWRO national office assumed that single motherhood was a social problem and, like many other black and white activists in the 1960s, ascribed to traditional notions of proper family forms. Richard Cloward, one of the most ardent defenders of the rights of welfare recipients, wrote in 1965:

Men for whom there are no jobs will nevertheless mate like other men, but they are not so likely to marry. Our society has preferred to deal with the

resulting female-headed families not by putting the men to work but by placing the unwed mothers and dependent children on public welfare—substituting check-writing machines for male wage earners. By this means we have robbed men of manhood, women of husbands, and children of fathers. To create a stable monogamous family, we need to provide men (especially Negro men) with the opportunity to be men, and that involves enabling them to perform occupationally.²⁹

White and black organizers within NWRO supported strategies that reinforced the traditional family. White male staff members at the national office wrote in the platform for the Poor People's Campaign in 1968 that “there is a desperate need for jobs in the ghettos for men to permit them to assume normal roles as breadwinners and heads of families.”³⁰ Dovetailing with mainstream policy analysts, many male leaders of NWRO agreed that single motherhood was a social pathology, every family needed a male breadwinner, and male employment was a long-term solution to poverty.³¹ The debate around the *Moynihan Report* demonstrated the widespread consensus among people on both the left and the right of the “problem” of single motherhood in the black community.³²

Women in the welfare rights movement, on the other hand, attempted to debunk the notion that single motherhood signaled culture deficiency and challenged the assumption that poor single mothers needed a male breadwinner.³³ Reclaiming their own definition of functional families, they argued that there was nothing inherently wrong with women raising children alone. Welfare rights activists in West Virginia counseled recipients to get a “paupers’ divorce” if the welfare department won’t pay for a divorce, suggesting that women separate from their husbands and plead ignorance about their whereabouts.³⁴ When women did marry someone who was not the father of their children, they wanted to continue to receive welfare and maintain their economic independence. Westside ADC Mothers of Detroit sought to overturn a policy making the new husband financially liable for the children of the recipient.³⁵

Welfare rights activists criticized intimate relationships that oppressed women. According to reporter Gordon Brumm, Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW) believed that marriage with its “fixed rules and obligations” was a “means for domination more than a means for expressing love.”³⁶ Although they valued motherhood, they did not promote marriage or encourage women to accept a subordinate status as mother and homemaker. They believed women should have autonomy in choosing their partners and suggested alternative family and relationship models—where women had control of their personal lives and could strive for fulfilling relationships. MAW explained, “Instead [of institutional marriage], they favor love, . . . responsibility toward other persons, and freedom to whatever extent that responsibility allows.”³⁷ Welfare rights activists asserted their right to date without negative repercussions from the welfare department. In Morgantown, West Virginia activists wrote in a handbook that “an AFDC

mother can have male visitors as often as she wants and go out on dates if she leaves her children in the care of a responsible person.”³⁸

Women in the welfare rights movement tackled head-on criticisms that welfare recipients’ “dependency” distinguished them from other women. There were many women and mothers, they suggested, who were dependent. Women in MAW argued that women on AFDC “supported out of public funds” were not much different from wives dependent on wages paid to men and also supported by public funds in the form of taxes or higher prices. The family-wage system assumed that men had families to sustain and justified paying them higher wages. Yet the same consideration was not given to women supporting their families. Working mothers “need nearly the same income as a family man, yet they are expected to take jobs ordinarily occupied by young unmarried women.”³⁹ Welfare rights activists explored how the disparate realities of men and women caring for families were socially constructed. The critical factor determining their entitlements was not their familial responsibility, but their gender, race, and class status.

Women in the welfare rights movement attempted to legitimate their status as single parents and assert their right to marry or date on their own terms free of social stigma or repercussions from the welfare department. At a time when welfare recipients—black recipients in particular—were increasingly attacked as immoral and licentious women not worthy of receiving public assistance, these welfare recipients stood up to declare their right to be single mothers.⁴⁰ Welfare rights activists supported poor women’s right to public assistance whether or not they conformed to the dominant norm of a heterosexual, patriarchal family model. Their ultimate goal was not restoration of the two-parent family, but autonomy and economic support for poor women. They defended their status as single mothers and disputed arguments vilifying them. For these welfare activists, autonomy meant preserving their right to be women and mothers independent of men.

Women, Welfare, and Work

The debates about single motherhood, rising welfare rolls, inadequate budgets, and the black family were reflected in welfare reform policies of the 1960s, which for the first time sought to require women on welfare to work. When AFDC was established in 1935, it was rooted in the male breadwinner model of the family. Poor women without a breadwinner, the architects reasoned, should be supported in their work as mothers so they could carry out their domestic responsibilities. Although AFDC benefits were too low for mothers to avoid all paid employment, the program lauded women’s mothering role. This began to change, however, when more black women joined the rolls. In the early 1960s, national welfare policy shifted to encourage women on welfare to enter the labor force rather than to support them in their work as mothers. Work incentives were first passed as part

of the 1962 Social Security Amendments, which permitted states to require adult recipients to work in exchange for benefits and allowed them to deduct work-related expenses when computing welfare benefits.⁴¹

The shift in the goals of AFDC was embodied most clearly in the 1967 Amendments to the Social Security Act. The Amendments had several components. It included a provision requiring states to establish a minimum level of “health and decency” for welfare recipients. The provision, which sought to improve the living standards of welfare recipients, was later used as a basis for legal struggles by the welfare rights movement to increase monthly stipends. The proposed Social Security Amendments also made employment of welfare recipients a mandatory and permanent feature of federal welfare policy. The Work Incentive Program (WIN) required states to refer a portion of their AFDC population with school-age children to accept either job training or employment, provided funding for day care, and allowed recipients to keep the first \$30 of their monthly income and one-third of anything beyond that. Recipients refusing to participate in work or training lost their benefits. By mandating work, the 1967 Amendments reversed a basic premise of the original welfare program: to support single mothers. WIN undermined the idea that welfare was an entitlement for poor single parents and their children and more firmly tied benefits to the behavior of recipients.

In addition to the new work program, the bill also capped increases in AFDC because of parental absence from the home due to desertion or a child born outside of marriage. Repealed before it ever took effect, the inclusion of this clause was nonetheless important. The House Ways and Means Committee, for example, reported that it was “very concerned about the continued growth” of the ADC rolls due to “family breakup and illegitimacy.”⁴² The 1967 Social Security Amendments, then, aimed to resolve the problems that many people believed plagued AFDC—rising caseloads, inadequate budgets, out-of-marriage births, and black women’s tenuous work ethic. For women in the welfare rights movement, the work requirement was the most appalling aspect of the proposed Amendments.

The new welfare proposals represented a widespread consensus in the 1960s that women on welfare should work. Liberals, conservatives, and many radicals, concurred that employment would solve the immediate problem of rising welfare rolls and the long-term problem of poverty.⁴³ Democrats and Republicans did not agree completely on all aspects of the WIN proposals. President Johnson offered amendments for child care and a work incentive allowing recipients to keep a portion of their earnings and suggested making mandatory the AFDC–Unemployed Parent program, which started in 1961 and extended benefits to two-parent families. But even these revisions reinforced the dominant view about the need to bolster the two-parent family and require recipients to work.

NWRO lobbied against the proposed work requirements. In August 1967, it held a public hearing and members spoke to a roaring crowd of several hundred, in the presence of what one reporter called an “unusual force” of police officers.⁴⁴

The delegates then adjourned to the Mall in downtown Washington for a “Mothers’ March” which drew 1000 people and later a picket at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. At the rally, Margaret McCarty, welfare rights leader in Baltimore, invoked the historical oppression of African Americans as well as the racial pride of period, when she said “lousy, dirty, conniving brutes” devised the bill to “take us back to slavery...I’m black and I’m beautiful and they ain’t going to take me back.”⁴⁵ NWRO aimed to ameliorate the problem of poverty through an adequate income, not employment and argued that “having a job is no guarantee against poverty.” In a pamphlet called the “Six Myths about Welfare” written a few years after passage of the bill, NWRO wrote that under WIN, the welfare department would force a mother “to take any job, even if it’s not covered by minimum wage laws. In the South, especially, where cheap ‘domestics’ are in greatest demand, the WIN program can be tantamount to involuntary servitude.”⁴⁶ They called the bill “a betrayal of the poor, a declaration of war upon our families, and a fraud on the future of our nation.”⁴⁷

The next month, NWRO testified before the Senate Finance Committee about the impending legislation. Fifty women attended, many with their children in tow. Welfare recipients with prepared testimony denounced the regulations as “disgraceful.” Beulah Sanders explained the potential impact of the work requirements on their children: “When our children are picked up by the police, they’ll ask them where their parents are. And we’ll have to tell the police that we’ve been forced to let them roam the streets because the Government says we have to go to work.”⁴⁸ Only two of the seventeen Senators were present to hear their testimony, however. In protest, the women staged a three-hour sit-in until all seventeen members of the Senate Finance Committee appeared. Committee Chairman Russell Long, Democrat from Louisiana, was so angry at the mothers’ conduct that when adjourning the meeting he banged the gavel so hard its head flew off. Long became enraged at the black recipient protestors and referred to them, in a revealingly racial manner, as “brood mares.”⁴⁹ The welfare recipients only left when District police threatened to fine and arrest them for unlawful entry.⁵⁰

Despite NWRO’s intense lobbying, WIN was enacted into law. The passage of WIN was a clear loss for the welfare rights movement. In practice, however, WIN did little to move recipients into the labor market. Congress provided limited funding for job training or child care and welfare administrators focused their attention on finding employment for poor fathers on welfare rather than mothers.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the 1967 Amendments signaled an important shift in federal welfare policy. It enacted the first federal mandatory work requirement for AFDC recipients.

Debating WIN

Although NWRO had vehemently opposed WIN, the NWRO national office, under Wiley’s leadership, signed in December 1968 a \$434,000 contract with the

Department of Labor to educate and train participants in the WIN program.⁵² Carl Rachlin, general counsel for NWRO, proposed the contract. He suggested that NWRO devise its own voluntary work program, demonstrating that with training and support recipients were eager to work.⁵³ For Wiley and his staff, the Department of Labor contract was not inconsistent with their opposition to the Work Incentive Program. They wrote in the national newsletter:

We are still opposed to forcing mothers to work and the other terrible features of the anti-welfare law. We have applied for and are operating this contract because we feel that since this law is on the books, we must see to it that the rights of recipients are protected.⁵⁴

Thus, middle-class staff members believed that mitigating the punitive components of the law would make it palatable and implicitly assumed that women on welfare should work.

Staff members opposed mandatory work programs, but argued that recipients wanted to work and would work if good jobs and appropriate training were available. So, strategically, as Tim Sampson explained, the organization favored employment: “Whenever we tried to figure out how to ... [relate] ... to the public, obviously jobs, the work issue, was always a key issue around communication.”⁵⁵ Wiley similarly felt that recipients’ willingness to work dispelled the racist stereotype that women on AFDC were lazy.⁵⁶ NWRO’s grant proposal stated that WIN “can provide new opportunities for training of welfare recipients for meaningful jobs which could lift them out of poverty.”⁵⁷ Most of the NWRO staff concurred with the popular belief that employment was the best route out of poverty.⁵⁸

Female leaders of the organization, primarily black, did not see employment for women on AFDC as a prescription for poverty. Some welfare recipients preferred work or took jobs while on welfare. Majorie Caesar of the Pittsfield Association of Adequate Welfare in western Massachusetts worked in a bar, as a nurse, in a bank and as a bookkeeper: “I’ve always been a person, independent, very independent. And so I always looked for a job.”⁵⁹ Catherine Germany, as well, believed employment allowed recipients to reach their “maximum potential.”⁶⁰ While recipients like Caesar and Germany valued work, most recipients favored choice. The Department of Labor contract troubled many of them, especially at the grassroots level precisely because of the lack of choice in WIN. The Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization lambasted Wiley and the other staff in Washington for “selling out” to the establishment. Roxanne Jones and Alice Jackson of Philadelphia perceived the national office’s Department of Labor contract as an endorsement of the “WIP program,” as they preferred to call it, which would help implement “the most reactionary program in decades. It is designed to remove mothers from the home and place them into ‘slave labor’ jobs.”⁶¹ The Pennsylvania leadership was so disturbed by the WIN contract that

in May 1969 they disrupted the NCC meeting in New York City and issued a press release outlining their grievances and threatening to secede from NWRO.⁶² Rather than taking the criticism seriously one national staff person framed the conflict as a power struggle; ‘‘Roxanne Jones was still ‘turn-oriented’ rather than ‘change-oriented.’ She was seeking, he thought, to retain a secure position of local domination to the detriment of the ideological goals of the movement.’’⁶³

Welfare Recipients on the Work of Mothering

Contrary to staff opinion, the women opposing the contract were not concerned primarily about ‘‘local domination’’ but had an ideological position rooted in their experiences and identity as mothers. Women in the welfare rights movement resisted WIN and NWRO’s WIN contract because they valued motherhood and opposed forcing women into the workforce. Welfare rights activists often referred to themselves as ‘‘mothers’’ or ‘‘mother-recipients,’’ and sought to bring dignity and respect to their work as mothers.⁶⁴

Welfare recipients challenged the artificial dichotomy between work and welfare. In 1968 Mothers for Adequate Welfare, a Boston group, said that ‘‘motherhood—whether the mother is married or not—is a role which should be fully supported, as fully rewarded, as fully honored, as any other.’’⁶⁵ A Massachusetts welfare advocacy organization argued ‘‘This means that a mother with school-age children will be forced (if they do not volunteer) to accept the same old inferior training or jobs that have always been left for poor people.’’⁶⁶ They believed that mothers and poor people had a right to welfare, regardless of the availability of jobs, and that as mothers they *did* work. For the women in the movement, challenging society’s assumptions about poor mothers, putting forth a morally defensible position, and protecting their dignity and worth as mothers was the most important task.⁶⁷

Welfare recipients’ insistence that the work of mothering served an important function in society resonated with the maternalist movement of the early twentieth century. Maternalist reformers in the 1910s and 1920s pushed for state pensions for poor single mothers—also called mothers’ pensions—the precursor of AFDC. Like women in the welfare rights movement, they justified assistance for poor single mothers based on their mothering responsibilities.⁶⁸ But the maternalist movement of the progressive era differed qualitatively from the struggle of women in the welfare rights movement. Most maternalists were prosperous white women as concerned with social disorder as helping the poor. For them, maintaining social stability and improving the lives of the poor meant requiring poor women to adapt to middle-class standards of respectability.⁶⁹ These included class, and culturally defined ideas of how to keep house and properly raise children. Maternalists’ reforms reinforced women’s socially defined role as homemakers. Women in the welfare rights movement, on the other hand, ultimately sought to give women autonomy to make choices for themselves. Because black

women, who were often expected to work, did not have a primary identity as mothers, valuing black women's work as mothers challenged social norms. It did not conform to dominant expectations.⁷⁰ For many black women in the welfare rights movement, their work as mothers had never been valued as much as their participation in waged labor.

Historians Linda Gordon and Nancy Fraser argue that historical constructions of notions of dependency shaped the discourse around welfare. In the early twentieth century policymakers considered recipients of AFDC "dependent," in contrast to recipients of Social Security and unemployment compensation. Originally defined by social relations, the term dependency did not necessarily have a negative connotation. They argue that in the postindustrial period, however, notions of dependency changed. Social problems were defined as individual and psychological and recipients of AFDC became stigmatized.⁷¹ However, it seems that in the postwar period, as welfare increasingly came to be seen as a problem of race more than individual failure, dependency was defined culturally rather than psychologically. In the 1960s, the poor became a culturally distinct group and poverty was more closely identified with African Americans.⁷² The changing views of AFDC reflected the emerging culture of poverty thesis and long-standing perceptions and stereotypes of black women. These stereotypes fueled the argument that black women, rather than being on welfare, ought to take paid employment.

This view of black women on welfare contrasted sharply with the situation of white women. In the 1960s, middle-class feminists had begun to demand greater opportunities for employment outside the home.⁷³ Psychologists and policymakers, however, discouraged the employment of middle-class mothers, arguing that employment would impair the emotional and psychological development of their children. For poor women, however, especially AFDC recipients, the story was quite different. An official HEW publication exposed the disjuncture between what was considered appropriate for middle-class white women and what was considered appropriate for women on welfare. Concluding that children on AFDC have more behavioral problems than other poor families, a study found that problems worsened when the mother stayed at home with the children. Welfare children "seem to have a higher incidence of serious disorders such as psychosis and appear to be more isolated, mistrustful, and anxious than the non-welfare children. . . . The employment status of the welfare mothers also seems to affect impairment: children of working mothers have less impairment."⁷⁴

Women in the welfare rights movement analyzed and scrutinized the different social expectations of white middle-class women and poor women of color, who had never been seen primarily as mothers and had never approximated the domestic ideal. One welfare recipient cleverly contrasted her situation with the reigning symbol of womanhood of the time, when she asked, "Jackie Kennedy gets a government check. Is anyone making her go to work?"⁷⁵ Welfare activists insisted that society value their work as mothers, illustrating the very different

perceptions and realities of gender across racial and class lines. For African American women, gender had not been shaped primarily by their roles as mothers and housewives, but instead by wage work. So, while many white middle-class women in the 1960s sought to be unshackled from the burdens of domesticity, black women on welfare wanted to be recognized as mothers.⁷⁶ This ideological front constituted part of their struggle for welfare rights.

Although welfare rights activists valued motherhood, they did not encourage mothers to stay home with their children, believing that women should have the opportunity to choose whether to work outside the home or not. To assist mothers wanting paid employment, welfare recipients supported the creation of child-care centers. This was “one of the first priorities” of Johnnie Tillmon’s welfare rights organization in California.⁷⁷ Mothers entering the workforce needed child care, but recipients cautioned that poor women employed at day-care centers might also be exploited. The image of the “Mammy” was a powerful one for African American women. Since slavery, black women had been forced, because of lack of employment options, to care for other people’s children.⁷⁸ Usually paid meager sums, they left their own children to create a comfortable home and environment for middle-class or wealthy families. Therefore, day-care centers freed some women from the constraints of child care, but could just as likely exploit other women.

So, “mothering is work” became a rallying cry of the welfare rights movement. It was the basis upon which women in the movement opposed mandatory work requirements. It also enabled them to confront the stigma and widespread disdain for welfare recipients. In their engagement with policy debates, this argument reflected one important political position of welfare rights activists.

Conclusion

Both middle-class staff and grassroots activists in the welfare rights movement participated in the debates about the black family, single motherhood, rising welfare rolls, and employment of women on welfare. The organization opposed the 1967 welfare amendments, but men and women in NWRO had somewhat different approaches. The male staff did not believe that welfare recipients should be forced to work. Their long-term solution, in fact, included providing well-paying jobs for men in order to re-establish the two-parent black family. But to counter racist images of black women as lazy, they publicly took a position that women on AFDC wanted to work, and given the opportunity, they would do so. On this, they were not that far from the women, who also believed that AFDC recipients should have the opportunity to work. But the female recipients defended their status as single mothers and justified public assistance by their work as mothers rather than simply the lack of employment opportunities. In doing so, they sought not just to transform the welfare system but the public’s perception of black women as well.

Despite the internal differences, influencing legislation and policy empowered recipients and helped them overcome the dehumanization and stigma associated with AFDC. By publicly identifying as welfare recipients, demanding participation in the making of welfare policy, and claiming their rights, they challenged the welfare status quo. Intelligent recipients articulating why they deserved assistance contrasted sharply with the stereotype of lazy, promiscuous, and ignorant single mothers on AFDC. By participating in the policymaking process, welfare rights activists helped demystify welfare and challenged a hierarchical, bureaucratic system that functioned to keep them passive and silent. In addition to their strategies of lobbying and participation, welfare rights activists also waged grassroots campaigns to ensure an adequate income, dignity, and respect from caseworkers. Their claims to motherhood were premised not just on the right to stay home, but required economic resources to enable them to properly raise their children.

