

The Logic of Welfare Reform: An Analysis of the Reauthorization of the Personal  
Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
CLASP	Center for Law and Social Policy
DRA	Deficit Reduction Act of 2005
EITC	Earned Income Tax Credit
FVO	Family Violence Option
PRWORA	Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

## **Abstract**

THE LOGIC OF WELFARE REFORM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE  
REAUTHORIZATION OF THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND WORK  
OPPORTUNITY RECONCILIATION ACT OF 1996

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Those involved in creating contemporary welfare reform legislation in the United States have boasted that the legislation, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), has been successful in removing recipients from the cash assistance welfare rolls and thus from the State's responsibility. Yet many analysts believe it has granted the State more invasive control over welfare recipients of cash assistance, even while reducing its role in providing a social safety net for them (Abramovitz 2000; Mink 1998; Neubeck 2006; Smith 2007). This reconfiguration of State regulation of low-income women and children, who are the majority of cash assistance recipients, involves a contradiction between the promotion of dependency on a male breadwinner via heterosexual marriage, or mandatory participation in paternity establishment and child support enforcement, and the promotion of self-sufficiency through low-wage work. This thesis analyzes the logic behind this major change in

welfare policy, specifically by examining the legislative process leading up to the 2006 welfare reform reauthorization legislation, to determine if this contradiction has been recognized or not within mainstream poverty discourse. The thesis explores how policymakers and those working with policymakers verbally justified the contradiction in order for it to be written into law by analyzing the State's discourse on poor women leading up to the reauthorization of this reform. An original feminist textual analysis of several Congressional hearings leading up to the February 8, 2006 reauthorization of PRWORA under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 is presented. This feminist analysis focused on an examination of the processes by which a text is produced, such as Congressional hearings, and contains two elements: 1) a critical interrogation and deconstruction of the welfare reform discourse as it might be gendered, racialized, and classed in spite of policymakers' and witnesses' presentation of the welfare recipient as an asexual, disembodied citizen; and 2) an analysis of not only what is there, but what is missing and possibly presumed by the policymakers and polity alike. Most policymakers and hearing witnesses did not perceive these two aspects of welfare reform to be contradictory, but rather to be complementary. As the ideology of the work and family ethics continues to constitute the logic of welfare reform and to infuse its resulting discourse, the reality that work alone or dependency on a male breadwinner alone does not reduce poverty for most low-income women and children leads policymakers and their supporting witnesses to press for both simultaneously.

## **Chapter One**

### **A Brief Introduction to Welfare Reform**

Those involved in creating contemporary welfare reform legislation in the United States have boasted that the 1996 legislation has been successful in removing recipients from the cash assistance welfare rolls and thus from the State's responsibility. Yet many analysts believe it has granted the State more invasive control over welfare recipients of cash assistance, even while reducing its role in providing a social safety net for them (Abramovitz 2000; Mink 1998; Neubeck 2006; Smith 2007). This reconfiguration of State regulation of low-income women and children, who are the majority of cash assistance recipients, involves a contradiction between the promotion of dependency on a male breadwinner via heterosexual marriage, or mandatory participation in paternity establishment and child support enforcement, and the promotion of self-sufficiency through low-wage work. The goal of this thesis is to analyze the logic behind this major change in welfare policy, specifically by examining the legislative process leading up to the 2006 welfare reform reauthorization legislation, to determine if this contradiction has been recognized or not within mainstream poverty discourse. I explored how policymakers and those working with policymakers verbally justified the contradiction in



order for it to be written into law by analyzing the State's discourse on poor women leading up to the reauthorization of this reform.

In 1996, Congress passed and President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) into law, ending entitlement to cash benefits for low-income families and establishing a block grant program that conditioned cash assistance receipt upon labor market participation. The 60 year old cash assistance entitlement program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was abolished and replaced by the more restrictive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which assigns the responsibility of creating and managing welfare-to-work programs and promoting other PRWORA goals to the states. State-level programs are intended to move adult recipients, predominantly single mothers and disproportionately women of color, quickly and efficiently from the welfare rolls to the labor market, and strict time limits have been imposed on the amount of time a person can receive aid. Recipients are now restricted to a two-year period of continuous aid and a cumulative lifetime limit of five years (PRWORA:110 Stat. 2113, 2137). The law also deemed legal immigrants entering the United States on or after the PRWORA enactment date of August 22, 1996 ineligible "for any Federal means-tested public benefit for a period of 5 years beginning on the date of the alien's entry into the United States with a status within the meaning of the term 'qualified alien'" (PRWORA:110 Stat. 2265).

The "work first" strategy adopted by most states has been one that emphasizes taking any job, rather than one that emphasizes education and skills-development (Peck 2001). PRWORA required states to achieve a minimum work participation rate of 50

percent by fiscal year 2002 but allowed for a participation rate reduction that corresponded with caseload reduction, a provision that was problematized and revisited during reauthorization. Adults in one-parent families were required to participate in 30 hours of work per week, or 20 hours for a single parent with a child under age six, by fiscal year 2000, and approved work activities were limited in terms of the amount of time spent on job searching, vocational educational training, and education (PRWORA:110 Stat. 2129-2133).

Proponents of welfare reform, such as those policymakers who were involved in the creation of the initial welfare reform legislation of 1995, have portrayed low-wage jobs as a “ladder” out of poverty, and poverty as a way of life that parents will pass on to their children unless the government intervenes, requiring them to end their “welfare dependency” and become role models “for the societal value of self-sufficiency” (H.R. 4:36). By providing “States with the resources and authority necessary to help, cajole, lure, or force adults off welfare and into paid employment as quickly as possible,” the federal government would require low-income adults to take “personal responsibility” for their poverty (H.R. 4:36). This justification for work requirements is based on the assumption that welfare reform legislation must address individual attitudes and actions, and so the State must attempt to establish a supposedly non-existent work ethic among low-income populations in order to dismantle the “culture of poverty” into which poor children are born (Handler and Hasenfeld 1997).

In addition to job preparation and work requirements, the welfare reform legislation promotes two-parent heterosexual marriage, as well as the prevention of and

reduction in the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies (PRWORA:110 Stat. 2113). The first lines of the PRWORA legislation state that “Marriage is the foundation of a successful society” and “an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children” (PRWORA:110 Stat. 2110). The legislation cites the correlation between the rise in the number of children receiving AFDC between 1965 and 1992 with an increase in births to unmarried women, and then goes on to list the “negative consequences of an out-of-wedlock birth on the mother, the child, the family, and society,” such as a child’s low verbal cognitive development and future welfare use, as well as higher neighborhood crime rates (PRWORA:110 Stat. 2110-2112). Funding was authorized for abstinence education, or educational or motivational programs that teach that “a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity,” that “sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects,” and that “bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society” (PRWORA:110 Stat. 2354). States were offered bonuses for reducing “illegitimacy” (PRWORA:110 Stat. 2118). Many states adopted “family cap” policies that deny benefits to children conceived while a mother is already receiving TANF. Compared with the measurable results of work requirements, the results of the marriage and abstinence portion of welfare reform have been minimal, except possibly to discourage prospective recipients from applying for benefits (Reese 2005).

PRWORA also requires states to establish paternity and to enact child support enforcement for a greater number of welfare cases than pre-1996 implementation. An

unmarried recipient is required to identify the noncustodial biological parent, often the father, of her child in order to begin the process of collecting child support from that parent, or risk losing a significant portion of her family's TANF benefits (PRWORA:110 Stat. 2135).

Both the work and family aspects of the law have persisted since its inception nearly thirteen years ago, despite a lack of results. The number of people living below the poverty line in the United States did decline between 1996 and 2000; however, the poverty rate in both real and proportionate terms has steadily increased since then, and the temporary and slight reduction in the poverty rate from 13.7 percent in 1996 to 12.3 percent in 2006 has not been proven to be related to PRWORA (U.S. Census Bureau). In fact, according to an empirical analysis of panel data between 1991 and 2003, the 1996 legislation has not contributed significantly to poverty reduction (Li and Upadhyay 2008). Rather, changes in the poverty rate have been connected to economic upturns and downturns, such as the onset of recession in 2000. In the meantime, the depth of poverty rose: "By 2002, the average margin by which the poor were below the poverty line was \$2,813, the highest since it was first recorded in 1979" (Reese 2005:198). In short, welfare reform has not proven to have much to do with poverty reduction.

Welfare reformers' heavy emphasis on heterosexual marriage, two-parent households, and paid work in the low-wage labor market as the means to end welfare "dependence" avoids structural problems of limited educational opportunity, an unregulated and unstable low-wage labor market that does not offer employee benefits, and racial, gender, and class discrimination faced by poor single mothers who are the sole

caretakers of children and have no access to affordable quality childcare. The assumption that one part of the solution is for poor women to find a husband reinforces the preference for the gender stereotypes of the “male primary breadwinner” and “dependent woman” and ignores the fact that the types of jobs available to lower-class men and women still would not enable most poor families to provide for their children. What then, is the logic behind welfare reform? How can a woman be both dependent and self-sufficient in the eyes of the State?

### **Welfare Reform Reauthorization**

The 1996 welfare reform legislation (PRWORA) was funded initially through September 2002. Although the Bush administration proposed its welfare reauthorization plan in February of 2002, Congress spent the next four years in a debate primarily over child care funding levels and proposed changes to work participation standards. During this time period, “the program operated under a series of 12 ‘temporary extension’ measures” (Falk, Gish, and Solomon-Fears 2007:1). Ultimately, the 107<sup>th</sup>, 108<sup>th</sup>, and 109<sup>th</sup> Congresses failed to pass freestanding welfare legislation and instead a scaled-back version of the reauthorization was embedded within the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005 (P.L. 109-171, S. 1932), enacted on February 8, 2006.

The DRA maintains the 1996 TANF block grant annual funding amount through FY2010, unadjusted for inflation; increases the share of families required to participate in work activities by cutting out loopholes in the original legislation; increases child care funding by \$1 billion over five years rather than the \$4.8 billion estimated by the

Congressional Budget Office that is necessary to maintain the existing and already insufficient level of child care subsidies; provides federal cost-sharing for child support passed through to TANF and former TANF families; provides up to \$100 million per year for the promotion of “healthy marriages”; and provides \$50 million per year for “responsible fatherhood” initiatives (Falk et al. 2007:1, 4, 6, 9-10).

The 2006 reauthorization of PRWORA thus involves an increased focus on single mothers’ participation in the labor market as independent workers, as well as on the promotion of heterosexual marriage and dependence on a male breadwinner. In the following chapters, I examine the processes that led up to this version of welfare reform reauthorization. In order to analyze the logic of welfare reform policy, I first establish an analytical framework based upon previous examinations of the welfare system and PRWORA in Chapter Two. While the literature in this review provides part of my framework, my intention is not to reproduce these analyses uncritically but to examine whether or not these criticisms are justified given the evidence in more recent primary source documents.

Secondly, I conducted an original feminist textual analysis of several Congressional hearings leading up to the February 8, 2006 reauthorization of PRWORA under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (Public Law 109-171), which I present in Chapters Three and Four. These hearings, which took place between 2002 and 2005, include:

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)  
Hearings Before the Committee on Finance, United States Senate, One Hundred Seventh  
Congress; Second Session  
March 12, April 10, and May 16, 2002  
S. HRG. 107-535  
U.S. Government Printing Office 80-476

Welfare Reform Reauthorization Proposals  
Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Ways and  
Means, U.S House of Representatives, One Hundred Seventh Congress; Second Session  
April 11, 2002  
Serial No. 107-87  
U.S. Government Printing Office 85-843

Welfare Reform: Building on Success  
Hearing Before the Committee on Finance, United States Senate, One Hundred Eighth  
Congress; First Session  
March 12, 2003  
S. HRG. 108-147  
U.S. Government Printing Office 88-259

Healthy Marriage: What is it and Why Should We Promote It?  
Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Children and Families of the Committee on Health,  
Education, Labor, and Pensions, United States Senate, One Hundred Eighth Congress;  
Second Session  
April 28, 2004  
S. HRG. 108-830  
U.S. Government Printing Office 93-523

Benefits of a Healthy Marriage  
Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy of the  
Committee on Finance, United States Senate, One Hundred Eighth Congress;  
Second Session  
May 5, 2004  
S. HRG. 108-595  
U.S. Government Printing Office 95-266

Welfare Reform Reauthorization Proposals  
Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress; First Session  
February 10, 2005  
Serial No. 109-5  
U.S. Government Printing Office 36-658

Welfare Reform: Reauthorization of Work and Child Care  
Hearing Before the Subcommittee on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Competitiveness of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress; First Session  
March 15, 2005  
Serial No. 109-4  
U.S. Government Printing Office 20-008

This feminist analysis focused on an examination of the processes by which a text is produced, such as Congressional hearings, and contained two elements: 1) a critical interrogation and deconstruction of the welfare reform discourse as it might be gendered, racialized, and classed in spite of policymakers' and witnesses' presentation of the welfare recipient as an asexual, disembodied citizen; and 2) an analysis of not only what is there, but what is missing and possibly presumed by the policymakers and polity alike.

The two main themes that emerged from my analysis of Congressional hearings on welfare reform between 2002 and 2005 include an emphasis on PRWORA's success, which was discussed largely in terms of effecting behavioral change by putting single mothers to work in low-wage jobs, and a reemphasis on family values and marriage, including a new focus on the well-being of children as the overarching purpose of the reauthorization. During the hearings that led to the DRA, policymakers, analysts, and business representatives often referred to the immense progress that had been made in



moving low-income mothers from welfare “dependency” to “self-sufficiency” since 1996 and the need to “build on the success” of welfare reform. While many were critical of the Bush administration’s proposed changes, such as a longer work week, and aware of the challenges low-income single mothers face, such as the lack of affordable child care, the overall philosophy of welfare reform – ending dependency and achieving self-sufficiency through required work and marriage or child support – continued to dominate the discourse on welfare.

Despite major setbacks such as the poor quality of the low-wage jobs many TANF recipients were taking and the difficulties in low-wage job retention, the mindset of Congress was generally very positive regarding welfare reform’s success. In his opening statement of the first Senate Finance Committee hearing on TANF reauthorization after the Bush proposal, Committee Chairman Max Baucus celebrated the fact that “millions of Americans left welfare for work just as we intended,” warmly welcoming Secretary Tommy Thompson of the Department of Health and Human Services and referring to him as “the father of this wonderful change” (2002:1). Ranking committee member Senator Charles Grassley lauded the “dignity of holding a job,” and the merits of work over welfare, citing welfare leavers in his state of Iowa who said that work “helped improved self-esteem, independence, and a sense of responsibility” (2002:4). Grassley then pointed to the main reasons he believed people live in poverty in the United States: single parenting and lack of educational attainment. He argued, “as we work on the institution of marriage and as we work on people educating themselves and improving their abilities to earn more, we’re going to solve the two basic elements of

poverty” and that by producing bipartisan legislation the government would “move more people to be independent and to be better, productive citizens” (2002:5).

In these introductory statements to welfare reform reauthorization, policymakers have continued to frame the problems of poverty in terms of individuated behavioral improvement. Although lack of education can be framed in terms of structural challenges such as the lower quality of public schools in low-income regions and unequal access to higher education, Senator Grassley couched this problem in the language of behavioral change by referring to “educational attainment,” rather than making the connection between poor neighborhoods and poor schools, and implying that welfare recipients have yet to achieve the status of full citizenship. By doing so, he releases Congress from its responsibility to support higher education within reauthorization legislation via the expansion of allowable work activities, such as increasing the amount of time recipients can spend in school instead of at a job. In fact, unlike marriage promotion, education received no additional support under the DRA. Furthermore, by arguing that marriage and paid work are both key to eliminating poverty, Grassley manages the contradiction between encouraging poor single mothers to be both dependent on a male breadwinner while attempting to achieve self-sufficiency through work. He does so by pointing to these two solutions not as contradictory, but as *complementary*: A married woman who improves her own earning potential, even by making the minimum wage, is less likely to depend on the State; however, the State also must step in to create and monitor this change and these “better citizens” by attaching a male breadwinner to her lower earnings. As I demonstrate in Chapter Four, child support is considered a worthy substitute for an

in-home male breadwinner and thus a complement to welfare recipients' low wages as well.

Rather than viewing the promotion of self-sufficiency through work and dependency on a male breadwinner as contradictory, many involved in welfare reform reauthorization viewed the two as complementary. Throughout reauthorization hearings, policymakers and witnesses recognized that the kinds of jobs that many welfare recipients obtained were low-wage and not sufficient to support their families; however, they resorted to a poverty discourse that failed to challenge the systemic inequalities that reinforce poverty and instead promoted marriage and child support as complements to these jobs.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

The themes covered in this literature review include neoliberal ideology, the transformation of the welfare state and the feminization of poverty as applied to the United States, the perpetuation of racist and sexist stereotypes and hierarchies relating to class in the United States, the transition from welfare to workfare within the context of a growing low-wage labor market, State disciplining and regulation of gender and sexuality, and the assumptions embedded within poverty knowledge and discourse that inform welfare policy.

The expansion of the free market via global implementation of neoliberal economic policies has been accompanied by a devaluation of social rights and the welfare state and the hegemonic ideology that poverty can and should be alleviated through self-reliance and autonomous market citizenship. Within this context, nation states have appropriated the language of empowerment to promote further expansion of the market and exonerate themselves from social responsibility (Cruikshank 1999). In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey (2005) critiques neoliberalism by examining how Western governments, in particular the United States and Britain, began to cultivate and to implement economic policies based on the values of neoliberal thought, which

spread unevenly throughout the world via the deregulation of financial markets, increased pressure on nation states to open up their borders to capital and commodity flow, the administration of structural adjustment programs in developing countries, and the dominance of neoliberal thought in powerful economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

Harvey argues that while proponents of neoliberalism espouse the virtues of the free market as the only option to the elimination of poverty and the assurance of human well-being, the benign and universal language of freedom has been used to mask the true intent of neoliberal policy: “to achieve the restoration of class power” to economic elites (2005:16). Likewise, Michael Katz (2008) argues that public policy is dominated by the language of the market, as the markets “appear to be outside history, culture, and social structure;” thus, the actions of the powerful are rationalized (30). The “unreflective application of market models to the welfare state ignores crucial and uncomfortable questions. Whom do market-based policies really serve? What are the forms of capital and who controls them? Who actually participates in the exchange and does it create casualties? (Katz 2008:31). In practice, neoliberal policy allows the State to pick and choose which rights and freedoms to protect and on whom those rights and freedoms are to be conferred (Harvey 2005).

According to Katz (2008) the welfare state includes a “collection of programs designed to assure economic security to all citizens by guaranteeing the fundamental necessities of life: food, shelter, medical care, protection in childhood, and support in old age” (9). Katz’s definition is not restricted to government programs, but includes private

activities regulated by the government such as employer-provided health insurance. He outlines the three main objectives of neoliberal public social policy in the 1980s: a war on dependence, including dependence on employer paternalism; the devolution of authority from the federal government to state and local governments and from the public sector to the private sector; and the “application of market models to social policy” (2008:26). As a result of these forces converging in the 1980s, Katz notes that “political arguments about the welfare state now revolve more around details than great principles” (2008:26). In the 1990s, “the rights of citizens depended increasingly on their participation in the regular labor market,” and social policy was withdrawn from single parents working at home as caregivers to their children and expanded for those who worked for wages in the labor market (Katz 2008:297).

Within this context of labor exploitation and the withdrawal of welfare provisions, “the social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favor of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility,” exposing more and more of the population to impoverishment (Harvey 2005:76). In place of welfare, “each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her actions and well-being... Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings” rather than structural problems such as gender, race and class inequalities (Harvey 2005:65). Making a case for economic human rights, Kenneth Neubeck (2006) argues that although the impoverished “have the same political and civil rights under the law,” the “possession of such rights is not in and of itself a ticket out of poverty for those who lack access to adequate education and training opportunities, quality health care, affordable child care,

and jobs that pay a living wage” (11). “Viewing poverty as a human rights issue would mean rejecting the notion that it is the personal responsibility of the impoverished individual” (Neubeck 2006:12). Neoliberal policy, which promotes economic growth via the free market, has not reduced poverty, but has decreased the number of better-paying industrial jobs and increased the number of low-wage jobs.

While Katz and Neubeck’s work on neoliberalism’s impact on the welfare state both touch upon its gendered aspects, feminist theorists in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s placed gender at the center of their analyses of neoliberal social policies. They viewed the gendered impact of these policies, or the feminization of poverty, as necessary to any critique of the welfare state, specifically critiquing the structure of the welfare system before contemporary reform. Mimi Abramovitz’s (1996) central argument is that the “family ethic,” or the “preoccupation with the nuclear family unit featuring a male breadwinner and an economically dependent female homemaker,” has strongly influenced women’s relationship with the welfare state (2). Abramovitz argues that despite the enduring existence of many different types of families, the conventional family model and its corresponding gender roles have been favored by social welfare programs, while alternative family formations predominated by poor women and women of color have been penalized. As a result, women who do not or cannot pursue marriage and homemaking have faced “social stigma, economic insecurity, and such penalties as mandatory work requirements, child removal, and strict government supervision of their parenting, sexual, and social life” (Abramovitz 1996:4). Abramovitz points out that although White middle-class women have been entering the workforce, the family ethic

still holds and is “invoked to support the sex segregation of the labor market and other arrangements that reduce the value and status of women’s waged labor,” keeping women financially dependent on men (1996:9).

Rather than the welfare state originating as a neutral safety net that steps in to protect citizens, the socialist feminist argument, which Abramovitz puts forth, holds that the welfare state exists in order to support the objectives and to mediate the conflicts of patriarchy and capitalism. As the family ethic ideology devalues women’s position in the private and public spheres, the expansion or withdrawal of the welfare state helps to satisfy a patriarchal capitalist society’s need for women’s unpaid labor in the home, as well as cheap female waged labor: “In its need for low paid workers, capitalism has maintained women (and other groups) as a reserve pool of labor that can be drawn into and out of the labor force as needed” (Abramovitz 1996:28).

Importantly Abramovitz (1996), writing in the time before federally mandated time limits ended cash benefit entitlement, acquiesces that the welfare state can offer women an alternative to low-wage labor and dependence on a male breadwinner: “Although AFDC’s harsh regulations intervene in the daily life of poor women on behalf of the status quo, the program also paradoxically contains the potential to counter social conditions on which capitalism and patriarchy depend” by functioning as a social wage, however small, offering poor women a limited choice that “increases their bargaining power at home and on the job” (314). Abramowitz points out that by the 1980s, when political elites realized that more poor women were making this choice, undercutting the



work and family ethics, they sought “to restore the workings of both capitalism and patriarchy” by attacking all entitlement programs (1996:349).

Nancy Fraser (1989) explores how the structural and ideological problems of the U.S. social-welfare system are interrelated, arguing that feminists need to challenge and to alter the framework through which policymakers create social welfare from one that assumes the needs of women to one that involves women as active co-participants who define their own needs. Fraser proposes a framework for inquiry that enables us to learn something important about the two-tiered structure of the welfare system by identifying its underlying norms and assumptions and by exposing “the processes by which welfare practices construct women and women’s needs according to specific interpretations” (1989:146). For example, the assumptions behind the sexual division of labor are embedded within the organization of the welfare system. Based on the “separate spheres” ideology, it places men in the non-domestic sphere as primary breadwinners and women, whose work outside the home is considered supplemental to men’s income, in the domestic sphere. Poor women are constructed as mothers and primary caregivers, but not as primary breadwinners, and so are not entitled to programs like unemployment insurance that provide more substantial benefits. Fraser argues that “feminized” programs like the former AFDC and the current TANF institutionalize the feminization of poverty, reinforcing basic structural inequalities.

In “Welfare is Not *for* Women,” Diana Pearce (1990) analyzes women’s poverty, explaining how it is fundamentally different from men’s poverty. Pearce attributes female poverty to two causes that are unique to women. Like Fraser, Pearce points out

that women are the primary caregivers of children, and as single mothers, they are not receiving adequate child support. Second, the labor market is not accommodating to women with children. Not only do women make less money than men and are less likely to obtain regular, full-time, year-round work, they have obstacles to employment such as affordable quality daycare and sexual harassment. In fact, Pearce says, “having a job is a much less certain route out of poverty for women than for men” (1990:269). A lack of attention to what poor women really need sends a message that they are not valued as mothers. Instead, they are stigmatized as being the cause of their own poverty and are therefore punished by a system that treats them as if they do not have a right to the assistance that they receive. By looking at feminist literature about the U.S. welfare system that was published before and during the time that contemporary welfare reform was conceived, we can then see how the legislation missed the mark, not only failing to counter the feminization of poverty, but in fact weakening the already tenuous position of low-income single mothers and their children in neoliberal American society.

The perpetuation of racist and sexist stereotypes relating to class also must be addressed as a crucial part of the analytical discourse on welfare reform. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) supports both Fraser and Pearce’s arguments that women are stigmatized by the welfare system, identifying various stereotypical and controlling images of African American women that originated from the slave era in order to deconstruct them and explain why they continue to persist today. She identifies one such image as that of the “welfare queen,” which is used to link Black women to the decline in the American way of life and to mask the real problem of an inefficient and insufficient social-welfare

system. “The welfare queen constitutes a highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman. Relying on the public dole, Black welfare queens are content to take the hard-earned money of tax-paying Americans and remain married to the state” (2000:80). By creating this stereotype, American society can continue to ignore the structural imbalances of the welfare system, while placing blame on the individual welfare recipient as a non-normative mother. Collins argues that these images are primarily used to define societal boundaries, marginalizing African American women so that others can feel as if they belong to a dominant ingroup. Social injustices, such as the disproportionate amount of African American women and children living in poverty, thus appear instead to be a natural and normal part of our culture.

Ange-Marie Hancock (2004) prefers the term “public identity” over “stereotype” when discussing the welfare queen because it embraces intersectionality of race, class, and gender: “Public identities are constituted of stereotypes and moral judgments of multiple group identities (e.g., race, class, gender) ascribed to groups that are the subject of legislative policy” (15). These judgments, which unlike stereotypes are less susceptible to change and are reinforced over time, are based on the socially constructed perceptions and preexisting beliefs of non-group members about members of marginalized groups and inform and advance so-called race- or gender-“neutral” public policy goals. The public identity of the welfare queen has been used to justify policy that highlights individual behavior, such as a perceived aversion to economic individualism or sexual immorality, as the primary cause of poverty (Hancock 2004). Once this public identity has been disseminated it incites what Hancock calls the politics of disgust, or the

perversion of democratic attention, which she notes “is not limited to the ‘rich White male establishment’” but occurs across race, gender, and class groups (2004:53). As welfare recipients’ claims are no longer deemed legitimate, “Elites are then free to devise a policy remedy in their own interests, or based on their own misdiagnosis of the claimants’ situation” (Hancock 2004:145). Furthermore, as is evident in welfare reform reauthorization, Hancock notes that attention is then diverted to those who are considered to be the more legitimate claimants: children.

Ellen Reese (2005) cites the increased enrollment of Black, single mothers after World War II as a factor in increased public hostility toward welfare. Reese explains that conservative politicians played on racist sentiments and sanctified the patriarchal, heterosexual nuclear family to create sexist, racist, and classist stereotypes. For example, unlike White, middle-class mothers, low-income women of color are expected to work, their caretaking role disregarded and devalued. The alliance that developed between conservative low-wage employers and White working and middle classes in their opposition to welfare “was rooted in a combination of business interests in minimizing wages and taxes, racial resentments, patriarchal family values, and the Protestant work ethic” and was directed against single women of color (2005:31). These interests and ideologies converged to create the contemporary version of welfare, setting the stage for further perpetuation of the myths surrounding welfare and further degradation of low-income women in the United States.

After PRWORA enactment, authors like Sanford Schram (2006) argue that within the context of the politically correct “post-civil rights era,” in which explicit racial

discrimination is taboo, race continues to matter in policymaking via the “new politics of racial implication” (224). In what he calls “an era of race-blind public policy, racial hierarchy is re-created more by stealth,” and continues to influence and to be influenced by welfare reform (2006:226). Factors contributing to this new politics of racial implication include a change in demographics such that “race is less a black/white issue than in the past” and includes Latinos and immigrants; growing public skepticism about welfare support for poor women of color as more nonpoor women enter the workforce; “the emergence of significant class divisions within racial minority groups,” along with rising but still low representation of minorities within political parties; residential segregation that results in differential access to education and other public services, as well as a lack of understanding by Whites and the nonpoor regarding the structural barriers faced by low-income families of color; and a “neoliberal disciplinary regime” that accepts existing social relations so that “Welfare functions within a racial order and therefore involves rationalities dependent on that order,” enforcing “low-wage work disproportionately on nonwhites” (Schram 2006:226-229).

Schram argues that while the discourse of welfare reform is ostensibly race-neutral, its work-first philosophy is racially biased because nonwhites have less education and work experience on average; thus, as empirical research has documented, nonwhites are more likely to be sanctioned due to noncompliance and are less likely to find jobs that will enable them to get out of poverty. In turn, “race becomes its own self-fulfilling prophecy,” and the worst is assumed of racial minority recipients, who fall further behind White recipients: rather than racial disadvantages, such as discrimination in hiring,

personal deficiency linked to race is viewed as a cause of disproportionate minority poverty (Schram 2006:230). Schram points out that with the “darkening of the welfare rolls, welfare risks increasingly being seen as a ‘black program’ for those ‘other’ people who are not conforming to the work and family rules of white middle-class society, making it a program more vulnerable to losing support or being revised to take a more punitive approach” (2006:232). For example, quantitative research has shown a correlation between the rising percentage of Black and Latino welfare recipients and the rising probability of strong sanctions, strict time limits, and application of the family cap option (Soss et al. 2001). Gooden and Douglas’ (2006) empirical analysis of state-level welfare policy shows a positive relationship between stricter welfare policies and states with higher Black populations. They concluded that “Clients in high black population states are attempting to achieve self-sufficiency under much harsher policies than clients on welfare in states that do not have high black populations” (2006:218).

In their case study of Mexican immigrant women in the Los Angeles area, Alejandra Marchevsky and Jeanne Theoharis (2006) demonstrate that the administrative humiliation that Fraser described as a characterization of secondary “feminine” programs is still alive and well in current welfare-to-work programs, continuing to position participants, the majority of whom are minority women, as the negatives of possessive individuals. Rather than serving as a reform of welfare, workfare is in actuality the inverse of welfare. The reemergence of workfare rhetoric during the 1980s and 1990s appealed to an American public who had come to reject the notion of welfare as an entitlement; thus, both political parties sought to appeal to voters through the discourse of

workfare. The common concern of both parties was to solve the problem of welfare, not poverty, as we know it; thus, a neoliberal shift occurred that changed the focus of poverty analysis from one that examined structural causes to one that pinpointed behavioral problems and personal responsibility (Peck 2001).

First and foremost, the low-wage labor market is deeply intrinsic to welfare-to-work policy. The principle of less eligibility says that the lowest wage worker must have a higher income than any welfare recipient, establishing a close relationship between wages and welfare. Economic factors, such as the transition from an industrial, or goods-producing, economy to a service economy, have forced down both wages and welfare benefits (Blau 2006). Political factors also contribute. Because legislation that would establish universal benefits is not in place as it is in other countries “sectoral distribution of employment matters more in the United States” (Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey 2003:176). Between 1989 and 2000 the service industry, which averages only 81 percent of the manufacturing industry’s compensation, was the source of 98 percent of new jobs created in the United States, with the largest growth occurring in the two lowest-paying of the service sector industries: retail trade and services, which consists primarily of health and temporary services. Retail, the industry in which women are disproportionately represented, had the lowest wages by far (Mishel et. al. 2003). As wages shrink, so do welfare benefits. Between 1970 and 2000, the median AFDC/TANF grant for a three-person family fell 47 percent (House Ways and Means Committee 2000:390).

As the principle of less eligibility came under threat in the 1980s and 1990s, the push for workfare over welfare gained momentum, and as more welfare recipients entered the low-wage labor market and competed for unskilled jobs after 1996, the decline in wages was exacerbated (Blau 2006;Reisch 2006). Morgen and Acker's study of welfare leavers in Oregon between 1998 and 2000 found that very few respondents who had left TANF, 13.8 percent, had jobs that met the study definition of a "good job," or a job that was "full-time, paid a wage that can sustain a family, and provides workers with key benefits," including sick leave and health insurance (Morgen et. al. 2006:86). They also found that 98 percent of respondents' families' incomes fell at or below the living wage amount calculated by the Northwest Policy Center for a single parent with two children in Oregon (Morgen et. al. 2006).

Workforce discipline and compliance, especially in the service sector, were also strengthened by the welfare reform regime, as "independence is defined as acquiescence to the values and goals of neoliberal institutional forces, whose center of power has shifted from the state to the corporate sector" (Reisch 2006:77). Jamie Peck (2001) makes a clear distinction between welfare and workfare, explaining how the State makes use of a flexible labor market, via welfare reform, to its benefit. While welfare structures are based on ideological principles of entitlement and need, workfare strategies are based on expectations of reciprocity and the enforcement of work and work values. Under the new reform, subjects are no longer passive recipients of income support, but are now positioned as active job seekers and labor market participants. Contemporary workfare policies, however, do not involve job creation through labor market reformation, and thus



the agency of workfare subjects is a limited and essentially false one. As Peck argues, “stripped down to its labor-regulatory essence, workfare is not about creating jobs for people that don’t have them; it is about creating workers for jobs that nobody wants. In a Foucauldian sense, it is seeking to make ‘docile bodies’ for the new economy: flexible, self-reliant, and self-disciplining” (2001:6). Peck believes that workfare has been used as a powerful discursive strategy that not only devalues the language and policies of welfare, but in turn has created new words and ways aimed at regulating the poor (2001:122).

Offering a feminist perspective on workfare, María Milagros López (1998) problematizes the notion of choice that permeates this discourse on the subculture of poverty: “unemployment and state dependence come to be seen increasingly as choice or moral turpitude” (200). López includes welfare programs that reward for “good behavior,” such as taking job skills classes, among those practices that regulate poor women’s bodies. These programs are based on the ideology that welfare mothers must be weaned off their dependency on the welfare state, rather than the belief that low-income women are entitled to subsidies that support them and their children. Like Peck, López argues that “behavioral technologies” such as workfare, which promote the training and retraining of poor women to integrate them into the labor market, are put in place by the State in order to shift responsibility for poverty to the poor.

Feminist economist Randy Albelda (2001) argues that welfare-to-work policy proponents have missed a crucial point by attempting to replace public cash assistance with immediate employment and low-income earnings: The jobs that single mothers on

welfare are able to get are not mother ready, in that they do not provide ancillary supports such as child care and do not offer the flexibility that a single mother needs in order to pick up her children from school or care for a sick child at home. As both Fraser and Pearce argued before contemporary welfare reform, the needs of low-income single mothers are not taken into account when creating welfare policy. As recent research on welfare reform has shown (Hays 2003;Henrici 2006), PRWORA continues to devalue caregiving work by failing to create mandates that would transform the low-wage labor market into a flexible, living-wage, benefit-providing labor market and enable single mothers to do the important unpaid work of parenting while participating in sustainable paid work.

Many feminist analyses of welfare reform have focused on the promotion of self-sufficiency through work requirements, while not as much attention has been given to the promotion of heterosexual two-parent marriages and its associated behavioral technologies and interventionist practices. Gwendolyn Mink (1998) argues that the strategy of welfare reform is to end single motherhood or at least to deny poor single mothers the right to choose care work for their own children over low-wage work. Furthermore, Mink points out that welfare reform seeks to restore patriarchal gender relations, punishing families that lack a male breadwinner in place of addressing gender- and race-based economic inequality: “rather than target mothers’ low wages for improvement, policymakers aimed to recover the absent paternal wage – either through child support or by restoring father-mother families” (1998:106).

This strategy persists despite evidence that points to structural inequalities as the root cause of poverty in the United States. For example, in 2005 while households headed by single men had a poverty rate of 17.6 percent, households headed by single women had a poverty rate of 36.2 percent, more than twice the rate of single-male-headed households. Households headed by single White women had a poverty rate of 29.2 percent, while households headed by single Black women had a poverty rate of 42.0 percent, and households headed by single Hispanic women had a poverty rate of 45.2 percent. Households headed by single White men had the lowest poverty rate of 13.1 percent (New Strategist Publications 2007). These gender- and race-based disparities in who is and is not likely to experience poverty in the United States are clear, yet the focus on family structure garners much more attention in welfare discourse.

Anna Marie Smith (2007) studies sexual regulation as the “concealed structure” of welfare reform, focusing on the aspects of welfare reform that promote heterosexual marriage and dependence on a male breadwinner such as marriage promotion, fatherhood programs, mandatory participation in paternity establishment and child support enforcement, the family cap, the promotion of family planning and child relinquishment within the context of the TANF program, and abstinence education, analyzing their implications for low-income women in the U.S. She examines the concept of “biopolitics,” State regulation of the poor, and the “demonization of the welfare mother in political discourse” (2007:7). The State, while pulling away from the poor in terms of providing social welfare, strongly intervenes in the private lives of poor single women, subjecting them to intense moral policing.

Smith applies Foucault's concept of the modern capitalist State's "biopower" to her analysis of welfare reform. Foucault (1978) argues that the transition from the classical to the modern State was characterized by a shift in the meanings and mechanisms of power. The modern State's power is one "bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them" (Foucault 1978:136). The State establishes its domination by taking charge of life, by setting up supervision of the body and its biological processes via regulatory controls. The beginning of the "biopower" era was marked by "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations," resulting in an interconnection of biological existence and political existence, whereby the State exercises power through intervention in life, or bodies (1978:140). Thus, as Smith points out, mechanisms established by the State such as the family cap law, which limits the amount of children covered by welfare, are intended to influence the number of children a woman has, and in effect, her sexual practices.

The rhetoric of welfare reform suggests that the welfare recipient can be disciplined through fertility regulation. Susan Thomas (1998) addresses the double jeopardy that Black women face as welfare recipients by arguing that the cause of poverty has been misdiagnosed as too many newborns, and that this diagnosis is racially motivated since there is a higher incidence of poverty and non-marital childbearing among African Americans. She makes the point that fertility regulation proponents' legislation relies on the culture of single motherhood, which "holds that poverty is a

product of the cultural deficiencies of single mothers” and that these mothers’ sexuality is rampant, their reproductive behavior is reckless, and that they purposely have more children in order to receive welfare (1998:426). These proponents fail to trace the origins of women’s poverty to the economic system, the lack of living-wage jobs and child care, or race and gender discrimination. The State attempts to take charge of the biological processes of reproduction and birth, exercising its power by purporting to be concerned with ordering and enhancing livelihoods; however, as Thomas argues, “when we see that welfare reforms are not driven by empirical reality but rather by stereotypes and scapegoating, we have good reason to object to those reforms” (1998:421). The women whose bodies are subjugated to the State through welfare programs may also object by disregarding the techniques of welfare reforms.

Mechanisms like fertility regulation may fail, but they often reach beyond their original targets, regulating those belonging to other populations. For example, “paternafare,” or requiring welfare applicants who are single mothers to enroll in a child support enforcement program in order to receive benefits, regulates fathers as well, and can serve as a deterrent altogether for prospective welfare applicants who may not want to establish contact with the biological father. The State justifies this invasion of poor women’s privacy and violation of their self-determination by basing its actions in children’s welfare; yet, the effects of behavioral technologies like “paternafare” reach further than children, devaluing the competency of single mothers and perpetuating sexist ideologies that place more value on a male breadwinner (Smith 2007).

Smith argues that the analysis of TANF as an example of biopower and the analysis of the welfare mother as a sexual subject are limited in that the policy does not match the rhetoric. For example, while reform proponents espouse that legislation is intended to morally discipline the welfare recipient into taking responsibility for her personal situation, the complex rules and punitive measures of TANF in actuality have served to discourage the poor from applying to the program at all or have forced many off of the welfare rolls for noncompliance or due to new time limitations. In fact, Smith points to the neoliberal message that is embedded in reform legislation, which emphasizes that those born to single mothers are doomed from birth and thus taxpayer money should not be spent on those who are poor because their lives deviate from the norm. The welfare system only exists to worsen their problem of “dependency” and so their only hope is to insert themselves into the market as “independent” entrepreneurs of low-wage work.

Interwoven with many of the above themes relating to welfare and poverty is the significance of discourse to social policy, so much so that scholars have challenged the epistemological underpinnings of poverty, criticizing the assumptions upon which antipoverty policy has been based. Schram (1995) argues that welfare policy research is implicated in the perpetuation of poverty because it is written in an “economistic-therapeutic-managerial discourse” and reduced to providing technical information to the State on how to regulate the behavior of the poor, while “attention to the broader structural context” is lost (xxiv, xxvii). His affirmation that discourse and structures of power are intertwined informs my own analysis that follows: “interrogating discourse

provides a way to challenge structures of power that constrain what is politically possible...highlighting the ways in which discourse helps construct what is taken to be real, natural, and true creates resources for working toward alternative arrangements” (1995:xxiv). Welfare policy research has been structured by the State, is “written in a discourse that reinforces state interests about how to understand ‘the poor’” and thus can be misappropriated easily by commentators and policymakers for political purposes (Schram 1995:4). Likewise, Alice O’Connor (2001) contends that poverty knowledge is fundamentally ideological and highly political in nature, and poverty research is an exercise of power by “an educated elite to categorize, stigmatize, but above all to neutralize the poor and disadvantaged through analysis that obscures the political nature of social and economic inequality” (12).

When poverty knowledge is viewed as an objective science, it becomes a source of language, such as the dichotomy of “dependency” or “deviance” versus “self-sufficiency,” and interpretive frameworks, such as the “poverty line” that many scholars have deemed to be political and set artificially low, rather than to be used as a real measure of poverty in the United States (Neubeck 2006;O’Connor 2001;Schram 1995). O’Connor argues that as a result, poverty knowledge has become a form of cultural affirmation: Poverty is an aberration, an exception to the rule of American values, and detached “from the language of income distribution, class, and racial inequality,” and thus eliminating poverty “will not require radical change” such as “a massive redistribution of power and wealth” (2001:15). In fact, ethnographers have pointed out that far from suffering from the pathologies of welfare “dependency,” welfare recipients

are very much a part of mainstream American culture, as they too subscribe to the ideology of self-reliance and waged work over welfare, viewing themselves as different from “other” welfare recipients who live outside the mainstream (Hays 2003; Weigt 2006).

The scholars who have addressed the implications and effects of neoliberal ideology and policy, the feminization of poverty, the perpetuation of class-based racist and sexist stereotypes, public images, and hierarchies, the transition from a welfare to workfare state, State disciplining and regulation of gender and sexuality, and a limited poverty discourse contribute to a literature that examines how the United States government and American culture have maintained the status quo of gender, race, and class relations. I have demonstrated how the themes addressed in this literature review overlap in the discourse on poor women and welfare reform, and I have shown that economic and political interests intersect with sexism, racism, and classism to reinforce gender, race, and class divisions in the United States. These divisions are visible when examining whom the deterioration of welfare entitlements affects the most via a legalized contradiction that requires welfare recipients to devalue their own competency as both mothers and breadwinners.



## Chapter Three

### **Building on the “Success” of Welfare Reform: The Limited Discourse of Low-Wage Work**

While several arguments put forth during the debate over welfare reform reauthorization underscored the need for recipients to be better supported within the labor market, the overall structure of the labor market, into which many low-income women enter with no guarantees, remained largely unchallenged. In fact, the precarious nature of the jobs into which many poor single mothers are hired has been recognized and accepted widely within the discourse of welfare reform. In this chapter, I will discuss how policymakers and hearing witnesses rationalized and justified putting TANF recipients to work in low-wage jobs, often referring to doing so as a “success” of welfare reform. First, I explain how the ideology of the work ethic and paternalistic poverty policy continued to imbue welfare reform discourse. Next, I address how the arguments of many hearing witnesses, who recognized the shortcomings of the original reform by calling for a more extensive work support system, were weakened by adhering to mainstream discourses of poverty and welfare that fail to challenge existing structures of inequality. Finally, I discuss some of the testimonies that offered alternative conceptions of work and recognized the diverse needs of low-income women. Throughout this chapter, I build on my thesis argument that most participants in the reauthorization

process managed welfare reform's contradiction of "self-sufficiency" in work and dependency at home by acknowledging that low-wage work alone cannot support a family.

### **Improving on the Work Ethic**

Few who testified on the impact of welfare reform at the reauthorization hearings criticized the underlying ideology of PRWORA that work is better than welfare for poor single mothers. Welfare continued to carry a stigma, while work was embellished with the lofty language of success and revered as a champion of "dignity." Arkansas Senator Blanche Lincoln claimed:

Welfare reform has been largely a success story. Nationally, welfare rolls have dropped by 52%. Enrollment in Arkansas's welfare program has dropped by 43 percent between June 1997 and January 2002. That means that more than 9,000 Arkansas families have moved from welfare to work during this time period. (2002:266)

Lincoln's statement reflects the general assumption at this time that the massive drop in the welfare rolls since the reform law's enactment meant that most recipients who were leaving welfare were working and thus part of the "success" of reform. In his testimony for this same hearing Senator Grassley claimed that "States have excelled in transforming welfare into work...Teams of leaders around the country have discovered innovative approaches to creating jobs for low-income workers. As a result, quality of life for millions of American families has greatly improved" (2002:3). Grassley admitted however that there was "room for improvement...many working women have yet to realize their full earning potential," and so policymakers should "continue to cultivate a

strong work ethic among our welfare system” (2002:4). Robert Rector of the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation argued:

Welfare reform has substantially reduced welfare’s rewards to non-work, but much more remains to be done. When TANF is re-authorized next year, federal work requirements should be strengthened to ensure that states require all able-bodied parents to engage in a supervised job search, community service work, or skills training as a condition of receiving aid. (2002:79)

Secretary Thompson pointed out that despite the transformative effects of the new welfare, “there are still too many of our fellow citizens who have not begun to realize a future of hope” and “too many men and women who remain trapped in a web of dependency and despair” (2002:6). According to these statements, those recipients who have not maximized their capability as low-wage labor market participants have not grasped this “work first” ideology and envisioned their futures as workers because of the blinding and debilitating effects of welfare.

Thompson followed the above statement by referring to the need “to take the next bold step in reforming welfare,” by approving the Bush administration’s proposal because it included “strengthening work requirements, promoting strong families, giving States more flexibility, and showing compassion to those in need” (2002:6). Thompson’s connection between those recipients who are not meeting work requirements and the promotion of a forty-hour week of welfare-to-work activities for recipients advances the belief that coming down harder on recipients by increasing work requirements will somehow improve their work ethics. In 2003, Thompson again said that increasing the work requirement would enable parents to “become accustomed to a full work week of activities, instead of just the 30 or 35 required under current law” (92). Likewise, Jason

Turner of Milwaukee's Center for Self-Sufficiency supported increasing work requirements so that participants could "practice organizing their lives around a realistic work schedule of eight hour work days and five day work weeks" (2002:108). Both testimonies put forth the claim that all recipients needed to be motivated to work more was to practice working more; however, the low-wage labor market, which is especially vulnerable to the ebbs and flows of a deregulated free market economy, is the most significant determinant of employment for the majority of welfare recipients and leavers. A study of TANF leavers in Oregon, which, unlike many studies of its kind, included job market characteristics in its list of barriers to getting and keeping jobs, found that respondents cited job-related problems, such as low pay, no benefits, irregular hours, and unavailability of jobs, as the most significant barrier to employment (Morgen 2002:752-753). Furthermore, PRWORA's intentional valuation of any kind of work outside the home over education and training does not enable most recipients to enter anything but the low-wage labor market with its unreliable hours, inflexibility, and job insecurity (Albelda 2001:70-71).

Lawrence Mead, a conservative scholar of antipoverty and welfare policy whose work informed the 1996 legislation, testified in favor of strengthened but more "realistic" work requirements at reauthorization hearings in 2002 and 2005. Mead has published books such as *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (1986) and *The New Paternalism: Supervisory Approaches to Poverty* (1997), in which he promotes work requirements for welfare recipients. Throughout his testimony, Mead relied on his theory of welfare, which Sharon Hays (2003) argues is based on a circular logic:

“welfare policy causes welfare deviance and thereby causes welfare poverty...the poor are deviant because we give them money because they are poor” (124). In his 2002 prepared statement for the Senate Finance Committee, Mead characterized welfare reform as “the achievement of a new, less permissive aid system,” in which “support is still being given to needy families, but many more adults have to function in return” (285). He urged Congress not to restore entitlement or abandon the “work first” philosophy. Rather, he argued that reauthorization should be about “how to rebuild welfare around work” and that some urban states that had found loopholes in the law had yet to “accept a serious work test” and needed stronger work standards (285).

Mead’s statement also was based on the culture of poverty theory discussed in Chapter One. He disagreed with the administration’s proposal of 40 hours of activity, since very few recipients had been participating at this level, and instead recommended 30-35 hours, arguing that “It is more important to achieve high participation for limited hours than to achieve lower participation for more hours. The former does the most to transform the culture of welfare, so that work is universally expected” (2002:287). He also disagreed with the message sent to TANF recipients when they are sanctioned only partially. Since the 1996 law allowed states to avoid full-family sanctions if an adult did not cooperate with work requirements, some states kept cases on their rolls in which children continued to receive their portion of the TANF grant. Mead argued:

...with a partial sanction, recipients fail to grasp that there is a work test...They can give up their own share of the cash grant, but keep the children’s share and all in-kind benefits, and henceforth be free of the work test. The culture of welfare cannot truly be changed until the right to do this is ended. Only then will many recipients take the work requirement seriously. (2002:287)

Many policymakers took Mead's concerns about partial sanctions and work requirements into serious consideration. The House bill (H.R. 240) that was later approved by the Human Resources Subcommittee in 2005 included a clause that would mandate full-family sanctions when a recipient did not comply with work requirements for two consecutive months or longer, while the corresponding Senate bill (S. 667) did not (Falk 2005:22).

Mead also likened child-only cases, in which a mother does not qualify for aid or hands her children over to relatives who then receive aid for the children, to weak sanctions, saying "The idea that only the children receive support in these cases is a fiction" (2002:287). He argued that Congress should find a way to require work from substitute caretakers or from those mothers who he claimed were avoiding the work test, such as legal or illegal immigrants with native-born children. This approach to reauthorization operates within the individual-level framework of poverty knowledge, in which discipline and behavior modification are more crucial than the overall welfare of recipients, including children. Mead makes assumptions about the character and integrity of immigrants, as if many are not already working inside and outside the home.

Mead took this same approach with the Food Stamps program when he asked Congress to reconsider its standards on Food Stamp entitlement, which he believed had not been "conditioned seriously on the behavior of claimants" in terms of work (2002:288). Similarly, he focused on recipient behavior with the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which he said "subsidizes low earnings regardless of the number of working hours" (2002:288). Mead called for attaching a work threshold to the EITC

because welfare leavers, who he said remain poor because they “do not work steady hours once off TANF,” might be motivated to work more if pending enhancements to EITC only benefited those who worked at least 20 hours a week (2002:288). In 2005, he argued against any changes to the existing law in terms of education. PRWORA allowed 30 percent of recipients to receive work credit for going to school for up to one year. He disagreed with both the House and Senate bills, which would have eradicated the 30 percent cap and limited the time to four months, or allowed for longer educational programs, respectively. Mead called these new provisions “a mistake,” saying they would allow recipients “to turn welfare into a college scholarship,” and argued that allowing this “offends equity, since many of the taxpayers who pay for welfare lack the same opportunity” (2005:48). This logic makes gross assumptions about welfare recipients as a homogenous and stigmatized group, including those about their needs, their work ethics, and their work histories.

In the case of welfare leavers, Mead claimed that “A paternalistic structure that promotes work must be maintained even after families have left cash welfare” (2002:288). Such a structure would include “close staff oversight of clients” and “the capacity to influence behavior” – a combination of “help and hassle” that Mead claimed was “warmly appreciated by most of the recipients” in a Wisconsin program (2002:289). Overall, Mead’s objective is to “merge the welfare population with the broader low-income population, most of which is employed,” and this requires a new paternalistic management style (2002:289). Mead again assumes a divide between welfare recipients and the working poor, when in reality many welfare recipients have shifted between work

and welfare several times (Edin and Lein 1997; Reese 2005). Rather than learning more about the diversity and fluidity of the American poor, Mead provided testimony that perpetuated stereotypes of welfare recipients as lazy, deceptive, and in need of someone to teach them about the work ethic. When he argues that the purpose of welfare is now “to maintain an entirely low-income community in work” he reveals his and welfare reform’s tacit acceptance of low-income existence: As long as the poor are regulated and thus working, their low income levels are secondary (2002:289-290).

### **Mixed Messages: Recognizing Shortcomings, Holding onto Rhetoric**

Many members of Congress and other witnesses at the reauthorization hearings were willing to point out the shortcomings of welfare reform. Many did not agree with the Bush administration’s increased work requirements or state work participation rates, pointing to insufficient supportive services such as child care; however, a tension existed between recognizing the context in which the new rules of reform were playing out and the need of most to support and reaffirm a stern neoliberal message of welfare temporality and personal responsibility. As Schram (1995) argues when referring to the impact of neoliberal ideology, “all political actors have had to at least pay homage to established institutions: the sanctity of the family, the universal applicability of the work ethic, and the autonomy of the market,” while ignoring “the limited nature of dominant notions of the family and the cruelty of the work ethic for unskilled workers who have been made unemployable by a postindustrial economy” (32). The political actors of welfare reform reauthorization who recognized the difficulties many recipients face in the



wake of PRWORA failed those current and former recipients when they chose to challenge the policy's defects using its own discourse, rather than a new discourse that addresses the structures of inequality the policy upheld.

In his statement, Senator Tom Carper claimed that the course that Congress took in TANF reauthorization "should stick to the tough love approach our country has adopted, with its focus on 'work first.' We must not change that focus (2002:164). Discussing a bill that he and other senators such as Hillary Clinton and Joe Lieberman unveiled, called the "The Work and Family Act," Carper praised a combination of increased work participation requirements and funding for "vital work supports" (2002:164). Senator Baucus also stressed that while the 1996 welfare reform was about requiring work, "welfare reauthorization in 2002 should be about supporting work," such as increasing funding for child care and transitional Medicaid coverage (2002:2). Citing a Montana study that found that only ten percent of those moving into jobs were economically self-sufficient, Baucus pointed out that one of the lessons learned since 1996 was that "getting a job isn't always the ticket out of poverty" and that "parents who are working hard to make ends meet" should not have to "raise their children in poverty" (2002:2). Lincoln also argued that Congress' reauthorization message should be "making work pay" because "if we are going to place an even greater emphasis on work, we must give states more resources for child care and other work-support services" (2002:267). The focus of Carper, Baucus, and Lincoln's statements is on "work supports," forms of assistance, such as child care, transportation subsidies, and Medicaid that enable those recipients who are "working hard" to keep the low-wage jobs they have obtained so that

they do not have to choose between taking a job and health care coverage for their children. Wendell Primus from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities also stressed the importance of work supports within the context of work requirements:

States used their block funds to design programs that capitalized on the strong economy and moved welfare recipients into private-sector jobs. As cash assistance case loads tumbled and the economy surged, employment rates among single mothers rose significantly, continuing an upward trend that began in 1993. While clearly playing a role, the law's work requirements were not the only factor in this increase. States were able to use TANF funds to create an expanded system of supports for low-income working families. In addition to helping families leave welfare, these supports, including child care, transportation assistance, and state earned income tax credits, have helped low-wage workers avoid going on to welfare in the first place. Besides TANF, other federal programs, including Medicaid, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) – all expanded in the 1990s – are part of this work support system. (2002:92)

In complete opposition to Mead, Primus stated that work requirements alone are insufficient to support welfare reform's so-called success. Indeed, ethnographers like Hays (2003) have pointed to the hope and optimism of welfare recipients regarding the prospect of a system of supportive services, despite the harsh reality of the labor market.

Representatives from other organizations such as the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation and the National Governors Association stressed the importance of focusing on these services going forward. Gordon Berlin, Senior Vice President of Manpower, argued that with an economic slowdown in the early 2000s, "the context of reform is changing," and that "the states' success in promoting employment has brought into sharper focus two newer problems – helping the working poor retain their jobs and advance in the labor market, and aiding the hard to employ left behind by welfare reform" (2002:141-142). In this same statement, however, Berlin praised welfare reform

policy for “transforming the welfare system from one that entitled poor families to public assistance to one that emphasized mutual obligation and provided temporary support while requiring work” (2002:141). Likewise, both Governor John Engler and Governor Howard Dean from the NGA relied on a discourse of anti-entitlement, welfare “dependency,” self-reliance, and work ethic establishment, while expressing concern for the so-called “new” problems that welfare recipients face post-reform. Engler urged the Finance Committee to “reject any proposals that would alter the course that states have followed in implementing welfare reform” so that states could continue to develop programs that address the challenges that remain in helping families attain long-term self-sufficiency even after abolishing AFDC, a program that “grew less effective as families became more reliant on public assistance” (2002:195). Engler also argued that while “Governors believe that the emphasis on work should continue to be paramount in welfare reform,” the TANF block grant should be adjusted for inflation and funding for non-cash assistance services should be increased in order to “sustain this new construct of delivering services to broad populations of low-income families” (2002:196, 198). Both Engler and Dean also disagreed with the Bush proposal’s reduction of countable work activities and lauded “mixed-strategy” programs, which “assess the capabilities and needs” of low-income families and combine work, job training, education, and substance abuse treatment on a limited basis, as the best approach to moving recipients from welfare to work (Dean 2002:180). Dean argued that the administration’s “expectation of immediate attachment to the work force for those families with multiple barriers and few or no skills is not only unrealistic, it is inconsistent with the expectations that we as a

nation hold for the unemployed,” who are only required to participate in job search activities while receiving unemployment benefits (2002:181). After pointing out the difficulties that both states and participants would have adhering to the administration’s proposed revisions, Dean asked policymakers to allow states to continue down their own individual and successful reform paths: “Families in need have heard and heeded the message of the past five years of welfare reform; public assistance no longer means income maintenance. Now families seek TANF assistance for temporary financial support and services to put them in a position to rely on themselves instead of public benefits” (2002:183). Both state leaders were somewhat conscious of the realities that welfare recipients face when required to enter the precarious low-wage labor market; however, by continuing to discuss welfare reform in terms of the “messages” it sends to these recipients, they did not challenge the overall structure of a punitive welfare system that valued work over full-time education and imposed strict time limits on benefits. Their idea of building on reform’s “success” was to continue focusing solely on administratively-defined needs assessment and the support services that follow in order to inform recipients on how they can best overcome their personal barriers and achieve self-sufficiency through work. By doing so, they continued to ignore the systemic inequalities discussed in Chapter Two that have shredded the social safety net for poor single mothers and subjected them to experimental programs that vary significantly from state to state with little federal oversight.

After noting the large growth in employment among single mothers since the enactment of welfare reform, Steve Savner, a Senior Staff Attorney for the Center for

Law and Social Policy (CLASP), also remarked that there were “a number of ongoing challenges that need to be addressed,” such as the fact that many of these mothers were employed in low-wage jobs, which offer earnings that remain low and do not offer benefits (2002:305). Like Engler and Dean, Savner favored mixed-strategy programs, as well as transitional jobs programs that “combine wage-paying jobs with skill development activities and related support services” so that recipients could find better jobs. Furthermore, Savner pointed out that despite low earnings and lack of benefits, participation in other welfare programs such as Food Stamps, Medicaid, and child care assistance declined for families exiting TANF, which could be due to difficulty accessing these programs. Immediately following this point, however, Savner also couched his argument in old discourse: “In reauthorization, Congress should continue TANF’s strong focus on work but should also communicate to states the importance of helping low-income families get better jobs” and “gain improved access to work supports” (2002:305-306). Through the old discourse, however, work supports become less of a relief for low-income families and more of a relief for low-wage employers.

The significance of low-wage jobs and work supports to the “success” of welfare reform is evident in the testimony of Brookings Institution Visiting Fellow Margy Waller, when she cited research that credits the more than 50 percent welfare caseload decline post-reform to a combination of factors including “the change in culture resulting from signaling in the federal law; a strong economy that created high demand for entry level workers; and ‘make work pay’ incentives like earned income tax credits, child care assistance, and other supports available to low-income working families” (2003:128).

Alongside the culture of poverty theory cited by Mead and others, Waller pointed to entry-level, oftentimes low-wage, jobs and the work supports that subsidize those jobs as key to moving poor single mothers off welfare. Waller recognized however that those leaving welfare were not finding full-time year-round jobs and that “These families are working, but poor...and are very much in need of work support services if they are to stay in the jobs and move up the ladder of work” (2003:129). She also acknowledged that state administrators had discovered that “a strict work-first approach...did not work well for all recipients” and that continuing state flexibility under reauthorization was crucial to meeting those needs (2003:129). Waller called for a bill that would “retain the welfare law’s focus on work without sacrificing flexibility” and claimed that a bill that “strengthens the engagement of individuals by encouraging universal engagement, increasing direct work requirements to 24 hours, and measures employment outcomes sends the right signals to states and individuals” (2003:138). Thus, she acknowledged the lack of stability that low-wage jobs offer while simultaneously calling for stricter work requirements. Waller’s argument for universal engagement and the need to send tougher messages to recipients diminishes her points made earlier about the struggles of low-income families leaving welfare. Overall, her testimony supported state programs that encourage recipients to stay in these types of unreliable jobs without challenging why these jobs are so unreliable in the first place.

The testimonies that most clearly display the tension between addressing the complex realities of low-income families and asking those same families to conform to the inflexible low-wage labor market came from those representing the American

business community. Former child AFDC recipient Rodney Carroll testified as the President and CEO of the Welfare to Work Partnership, now Business Interface, Inc., which is committed to mobilizing “the business community to help move welfare recipients out of poverty and into the workplace” (Business Interface Inc.). He began his prepared statement for the Senate Finance Committee with a quote by former Massachusetts governor William Weld that reads: “The best preparation for work is not thinking about work, talking about work, or studying for work: it is work” (2002:171). Carroll then presented himself on behalf of the American business community, which he said “can support those individuals and families who have moved from welfare to work and ensure that people who work hard and play by the rules get an equal chance at achieving the American dream” (2002:171). Both of these opening lines ground Carroll’s statement in the mainstream discourse on poverty and welfare, which focuses on the behavioral problems of the poor: If a welfare recipient “plays by the rules” of the American work ethic, she will be rewarded by the support of businesses that will allow her to keep her job and perhaps even move up the ladder; those who look to the State for cash assistance without looking for a job are thus perceived as cheating.

Further echoing the statements of witnesses like Mead, Carroll went on to discuss how the former welfare system was dysfunctional – a system in which millions of Americans were trapped “in a vicious cycle of dependence” and “in which parents lost opportunities in the present and children lost hope in the future” (2002:171). He credited the Partnership and the business community for playing a significant part in the success of welfare reform, saying that “the rationale for hiring welfare recipients had to be based

on something more than compassion or charity. It had to make good *business sense*.” (2002:171). By “good business sense,” Carroll meant that because many businesses “desperately needed more workers to sustain and expand their workforce,” a “nontraditional source of labor – former welfare recipients” – benefited these businesses by expanding production and increasing their bottom line (2002:171-172). Despite the downturn in the economy beginning in March 2001, Carroll added that the need for entry-level workers had not declined. He urged Congress to find ways to “retain and promote” new workers coming off of welfare by “thinking strategically about the challenges that confront many working families who have left welfare and responding with direct solutions,” such as work supports (2002:172). By doing so, Carroll asserted that not only welfare recipients who follow the letter of welfare law, but the business community, can benefit from the expansion of supportive services.

Like Carroll, Wendy Ardagna, Director of Government and Community Relations for Save-A-Lot, a limited-selection grocery store chain, tied the success of welfare reform to the efforts of the American business community. In fact, Ardagna opened her statement with the same quote by Loews Hotels CEO and Partnership Vice Chairman Jonathan Tisch that Carroll used to open his statement before the Subcommittee on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Competitiveness in October 2001: “Welfare to work is the perfect example of how two supposedly diametrically opposed goals of business – making money and being socially responsible – can intersect in a meaningful way” (2002:126). Furthermore, she and Carroll both used the following text in their 2002 statements:

There is no more noble, more patriotic or American cause than helping to move people from poverty through work. The welfare reform law of 1996



took the first steps towards moving [citizens,] families and individuals into lives of self-sufficiency. A great measure of this progress can be traced back to the businesses that provided an opportunity to work to millions of people. (Ardagna 2002:127; Carroll 2002:171)

Ardagna's perspective is neoliberal, as she tied American patriotism to the opportunities of the free market and claimed that "welfare to work is a smart solution for business" (2002:129). Like Carroll, she pointed to the ready supply of workers that welfare reform has provided to businesses like Save-A-Lot and praised the legislation's strong work first message as it relates to behavioral change: "As employers, we believe that almost any job is a good job to the extent that it promotes good work habits, marketable skills, valuable work experience and self-confidence" (2002:127).

In an effort "to urge Congress and the Administration to afford employers the flexibility to continue to define 'full-time' employment in a way that best meets their business needs," Ardagna argued:

No business is willing to invest in a person until they have proven themselves over a period of time. Full-time status is awarded as a form of promotion after an employee displays a level of commitment to working. Along with this, employers often offer valuable benefits such as health insurance, 401(k) plans, and other company incentives. (2002:127)

In the indefinite meantime, Ardagna emphasized the importance of work supports such as food stamps and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) in assisting entry-level workers with job retention "as they work toward advancing up the career ladder" (2002:28). Ardagna's testimony highlights a distinction between the first and second-tier labor markets. While many white collar and unionized blue-collar workers are guaranteed full-time work, health benefits and a specified salary, second-tier nonunionized workers must prove themselves worthy of such "rewards" to which their

first-tier counterparts are entitled, good behavior or not. Thus, as Liza Featherstone (2004) argues in the case of Wal-Mart, employers who are unwilling to provide a living-wage, guaranteed hours, or benefits to workers upfront are subsidized by welfare programs (148-149, 238). This is a reformed welfare system that transforms the social welfare state into a “capital investment welfare state,” which boasts a reciprocal relationship between low-wage workers and corporate America, when in fact it benefits businesses and investors more than the “fragile families” whom Ardagna said she had made her “life’s mission and passion” to help (Ardagna 2002:126; Quadagno 1999). While urging Congress to increase work supports is important, her narrow focus reaffirmed inequalities and discrimination in the labor market that many welfare recipients face. Rather than arguing that retail chains like Save-A-Lot and Wal-Mart should be more responsible for their workers’ livelihoods as well, Ardagna suggested setting up kiosks at work sites so that employees can register for benefits without ever leaving work. Even the on-site work-related training that she promoted as necessary to increased earnings must not take place during work hours but on workers’ lunch breaks or after their shifts. While witnesses like Ardagna were willing to call for bulking up supportive services for the working poor, they left part of the equation for resolving social and economic inequalities untouched.

Within the larger argument for an improved support system for low-income families, child care as a work support specifically emerged as a central focus of the hearings and a point of contention for those drawing up reauthorization legislation. Throughout the hearings, improved child well-being was emphasized as a necessary

addition to the overarching purpose of welfare reform. Likewise, Senator Baucus argued that “we could be performing a great service to our country by putting much more emphasis on child care, both in quantity and quality” (2002:19). Baucus then tied the need for additional higher quality child care to the need for better paying jobs and the possibility of increasing the minimum wage. He provided an example of a single mother in Montana who was not able to afford child care while working in a minimum wage job. Later, Carroll referred to this same mother when he said that if he was her, he would like to be given a child care subsidy, but ultimately “would prefer to make enough money to pay for my own child care” (2002:32). He argued that the long-term goal must be for mothers like this to achieve the dignity that comes with providing “for their own families” (2002:32). In this example, individual-level responsibility is singled out as the main pathway to dignity and success, while structural solutions like child care subsidies and mandating affordable childcare are devalued as temporary. Furthermore, Carroll did not build on Baucus’ connection between child care expenses and minimum wage jobs. By not doing so, he implied that somehow obtaining a “better job” so that a mother can pay for her own child care is preferable to altering the current level of quality found in minimum-wage jobs.

Savner also argued that any agenda for child well-being must “include efforts to ensure that TANF recipients and other low-income working families have access to needed child care assistance” (2002:313). He stressed the need for parents to find better-paying jobs that are “responsive to family needs,” pointing to research that suggested that replacing welfare benefits with wages alone does not increase family income or advance

child well-being. Specifically, Savner referred to research that suggests low-income parents' participation in work-related programs may have a negative impact on their adolescent children's behavior and school performance. He argued that while "This should not be an argument against work requirements and expectations...at a minimum, it would counsel for the importance of helping parents find jobs that are consistent with family responsibilities, and against simply mandating 40 hours of out-of-home participation" (2002:313). Like Baucus and Carroll, Savner acknowledged the poor quality of low-wage jobs and thus the need for better-paying jobs, adding that these jobs should have family-friendly policies. Missing from these arguments, however, is the fact that employers are not required to implement policies that account for the needs of workers with children, especially employers of those jobs available to the majority of welfare recipients. Present in these arguments is the ideology that work should be required and expected of welfare recipients. Work requirements for recipients that are not backed by government mandates for employers allows for poor single mothers to enter jobs of substandard quality without reliable child care, as legislators and their informers hope they can find something better later. The overall discourse is one that overvalues work for single mothers while establishing as secondary the development of the kind of labor market and universal support system that addresses the needs of many different types of families.

## **Alternative Conceptions of “Work”**

Among the policymakers who opposed the strict provisions of the Bush proposal and the bills that closely resembled that proposal were a few Congresswomen who spoke out against the injustices of welfare reform. Rep. Barbara Lee, Rep. Patsy Mink, and Rep. Lynn Woolsey all argued for the definition of “work activity” to include education – from Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to community college and advanced degrees. Their recommendations went beyond the time limitations on education that the 1996 law and reauthorization proposals included, proposing that recipients should be able to pursue education full-time. Mink asked, “Are we well-served by pushing a young single mother to accept a low-wage dead-end job where she will receive minimum wage, inadequate or no benefits, and little hope for a better future for herself and her children?” (2002:20). Like many others, Mink recognized the poor quality of the jobs many welfare recipients were coerced into taking; unlike many others, she did not resolve to refocus reauthorization on better-paying jobs alone; she presented a plan that fundamentally altered the ideology of welfare reform so that education, not work, came first. Mink also proposed counting care giving for children under the age of six or for all disabled children as work activities, as well as stopping the five-year clock if a recipient was engaged in allowable work activities. Essentially, Mink was arguing to cease applying the time limit to parents of young children and any recipients who worked or attended school. On the other hand, Mink closed her testimony by saying that her bill “retains the basic structure of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, including an emphasis on work

and a five-year lifetime limit” (2002:22). In other words, if a recipient chose not to pursue higher education, she would be subject to the same work requirements established in the original legislation. If a recipient with older non-disabled children chose not to work outside the home or go back to school, but instead chose to work at home as a caregiver, she would be subject to the same sanctions and time limits established in the original legislation. Thus, a tension arose for policymakers like Mink who were looking to reshape the foundation of welfare reform, as it did for those who sought only to prevent further punitive restrictions and requirements from being added to the law. Perhaps her bill was a necessary compromise in the face of the overwhelming ideology of work and cultural poverty present in reauthorization discourse. Though she did not promote mandates for low-wage employers, she and others like Lee and Woolsey did promote a path around low-wage jobs for those who choose education, including the time needed to pursue that path.

Besides policymakers, representatives from organizations concerned with the rights of low-income mothers had some voice at the reauthorization hearings. Welfare recipient Vanessa Brown, leader of the Mothers on the Move Committee at the Philadelphia Unemployment Project, described her experience of losing her business, applying for TANF, and hoping to take advantage of a job training program. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Brown lost her low-wage job at a travel industry call center. Unlike many of the other welfare-to-work mothers with whom she had worked, Brown had worked enough quarters to receive unemployment insurance. The

others she said, “had no safety net” (2002:267). Brown went on to explain that she was now attending a community college that offered a free semester to get her started:

I chose to pursue higher learning following my lay-off because I realized that my TANF training only prepared me for an unstable, low-wage job. I am here to testify that all welfare recipients don’t fit into one category. One size doesn’t fit all for us. I know that from my experience with the TANF program and the experiences that many others have told me about that TANF is not working. (2002:267)

Brown urged Congress not to increase work requirements because “more work is not the answer,” and to lift the federal cap on education and training in order to enable “people to develop the skills to compete in today’s fast-paced job market” (2002:268). She also called for the creation of transitional public jobs so that welfare recipients could gain work experience and training while earning a wage, as opposed to the alternative of unpaid workfare and community service.

Lisalyn Jacobs of Legal Momentum, formerly the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, argued that “Welfare reform has further exacerbated the effects of the wage gap...For welfare recipients who have found jobs, occupational segregation by gender relegates women to low-paying jobs that provide no way out of poverty” and called for the need to promote nontraditional job training and employment for women (2005:92). She pointed out that jobs such as operating engineer have higher entry-level wages, provide opportunities to move up the career ladder to significantly higher wages, and full benefits. Again, Congress was urged to eliminate education and training restrictions so that recipients had a better chance of getting a job that pays a living wage.

Jacobs also addressed the devaluation of care giving work that is inherent in welfare reform, arguing that “This notion that mothers’ care giving work is valueless is

false and pernicious...Policy debates in the United States must also start counting and recognizing the valuable work that all mothers – including poor single mothers – perform when they care for their young children” (2005:95-96). In contrast to reform proponents who claimed that TANF reauthorization should be about child well-being without questioning out-of-home work requirements for poor single mothers, she asked Congress to consider the moral and economic implications of requiring outside work from these mothers.

Perhaps the most powerful testimony relating to the valuation and consideration of caring work came from former welfare recipient and single mother Pat Albright of Philadelphia’s Every Mother is a Working Mother Network. Albright advocated for the rights of mothers to choose work outside the home and to decide if their children should be cared for by someone else. She criticized TANF, arguing that “There is a double standard at play here and one that is grounded both in racism and in discrimination against caregivers...we are asked to be more available to the job market than to our children” (2002:271, 273). Testimony like Albright’s, however, was rare among the many other testimonies that promoted required work outside the home as the best path to “self-sufficiency.”

### **Stalemate: Drawing the Line**

A noticeable shift in tone occurred between the reauthorization hearings of 2002 and 2005, from the enthusiasm and optimism of initial discussions, to frustration and partisanship, as legislators continued to clash over what provisions would and would not



make it into the final reauthorization law. While the original legislation had been lauded as widely bipartisan, divisions emerged between Democrats and Republicans as proposals were rejected and rehashed. Ron Haskins, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution pointed out that “The work issue has perhaps been the most controversial” and included work requirements and child care as two of the major issues in contention (2005:50). Ways and Means Human Resources Subcommittee Chairman Wally Herger argued that despite initial gains, “we have seen less progress in recent years...progress on reducing dependence has slowed, and poverty rates have started to edge up again...It is a disgrace that a successful program is languishing through eight short term extensions of current law” (2005:4-5). He pointed to H.R. 240, reintroduced in January 2005, as “comprehensive welfare reauthorization legislation” and an expression of “continued support for more work, stronger families and better outcomes for children. These are values we all can support” (2005:5). Like Herger, Rep. Jim McDermott expressed concern about increased poverty and the growing “gap between the rich and the poor in America” (2005:6). McDermott argued that “As a nation and as a people, we are not taking care of each other” and pointed to Republican control of the House, Senate, and White House as the culprit for the United States “turning from a nation...of ‘we’ to a country of ‘me,’ where citizens are rewarded for looking out for themselves,” especially when it comes to the needs of the poor (2005:6). He also argued that H.R. 240 was “bad policy” because it increased work requirements while underfunding child care. McDermott then claimed he would introduce legislation that day that would move welfare recipients into “real jobs” and out of poverty: “The bill has meaningful work

requirements along with necessary resources to implement them” (2005:8). The pattern of discord that became more evident as legislators, time and again, were unsuccessful at passing reauthorization legislation, made visible the discomfort that many had with continuing to force poor single mothers to work in low-wage jobs. While some tried to blame the other side of the aisle for not taking responsibility for their fellow citizens, one of the reasons for the stalemate was the original crux of bipartisan welfare reform: work requirements. In other words, many recognized the problem of low-wage jobs, yet most continued to uphold the discourse of work over welfare. They only disagreed as to how far to take it.

In the end the voices of welfare mothers, who no doubt recognized the complexities of their own lives, and their advocates, were overwhelmed by oversimplified work first and underdeveloped low-wage work support solutions. As a result, the DRA did nothing to promote education and training over low-wage work and instead increased work participation standards by cutting out loopholes that allowed states to avoid the original 50 percent participation requirement. These new provisions aim to increase the national average work participation rate for TANF families from 32 percent in FY2004 to 50 percent (Falk et al. 2007:9-10). Doing so will continue to increase competition for jobs in the low-wage market and drive down wages. At the same time, insufficient funding for child care will not match the increased need for child care subsidies. This scaled-back version of welfare reauthorization legislation, which resulted from a mainstream poverty and welfare discourse that only partially and

tentatively problematizes low-wage work, reinforced the structural inequalities that produce poverty.

## Chapter Four

### **The Other Piece of the Formula: Discourse on Marriage Promotion and Child Support Enforcement**

In the opening statement of the 2003 Senate Finance Committee hearing, “Welfare Reform: Building on Success,” Senator Grassley argued:

As we look to improve the act of 1996, I also believe that we need to consider whether we have done all we can to fulfill a fourth purpose of the 1996 act, and that was to encourage the formation and the maintenance of two-parent families. I believe that we need to do more to promote healthy families, and that this will have a significant impact on child well-being.  
(3)

As discussed in Chapter Two, Anna Marie Smith (2007) argues that the State, while pulling away from the poor in terms of providing social welfare, strongly intervenes in the private lives of poor single women, subjecting them to intense moral policing. In this chapter, I will discuss two of the mechanisms whereby the State exercises power through intervention in life, and intimate relationships specifically: marriage promotion and “paternafare,” or mandatory participation in paternity establishment and child support enforcement (Smith 2007). The same discourse that worked around and excused the existence of low-wage jobs for women trying to support their children also reinforced the assumption that income from a male breadwinner was the other significant component of welfare reform’s solution to women’s and children’s poverty in the United States.

Whether in the form of marriage or child support, policymakers and hearing witnesses rationalized that single mothers are more likely to be poor because they are not receiving financial support from men, who are more likely to have better jobs with higher wages and benefits. In this chapter, I develop my argument that these same political actors did not think poor single women capable of achieving self-sufficiency through work, but rather that income from biological fathers is necessary to supplement those wages if female-headed low-income families are to have a chance of achieving economic security. First, I discuss how single motherhood continued to be targeted as a prime cause of poverty, rather than structural inequalities that make it difficult for single mothers to make a living wage. Next, I discuss how a logic that indirectly recognizes the existence of gender inequalities in the labor market, without acknowledging those inequalities as the core of the feminization of poverty, begets poverty solutions that include funding marriage promotion programs, as well as improving child support enforcement. Finally, I discuss some alternative perspectives on marriage promotion and child support enforcement that challenged the mainstream discourse during TANF reauthorization and both mechanisms as viable solutions to poverty.

### **The Continued Assault on Single Motherhood**

While proponents of marriage promotion were quick to point out that government financed promotion did not translate into governmental coercion, marriage as a social institution and symbol of familial strength and stability was upheld throughout TANF reauthorization hearings as a solution to women's and children's poverty. After

Thompson stressed that the Bush administration did not want to force marriage, Senator Grassley argued that no one should be “defensive about the institution of marriage...it is a no-brainer. It has proven its value, not only in American society, but in most societies as the foundation for our society” (2002:11).

Thompson and others established a clear link between child well-being and healthy marriages and targeted single motherhood as a social problem directly responsible for child poverty and other social ills. After listing the “negative consequences of out of wedlock birth on the mother, the child, the family and society” Thompson referred to the redirecting of funding and policies toward marriage promotion as “common sense” (2002:7). He claimed that “Funds previously used for the Illegitimacy Reduction Bonus could be spent far more effectively on developing innovative approaches to support family formation and healthy marriages. Strong and stable families are good for children and must be a central goal of our next steps in welfare reform” (2002:336). Likewise, Wade Horn, Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services, quoted President Bush in order to define family formation in terms of marriage: “My Administration is committed to strengthening the American family. Many one-parent families are also a source of comfort and reassurance, yet a family with a mom and dad who are committed to marriage and devote themselves to their children helps provide children a sound foundation for success” (2002:250). Horn’s testimony reinforced the presumed superiority of traditional heterosexual two-parent marriage. By limiting the child-rearing success of one-parent families, which are often single-mother families, to basic emotional support, he establishes the patriarchal family as the ideal

family structure. Likewise, Senator Jeff Sessions remarked in his opening statement for the hearing before the Subcommittee on Children and Families entitled “Healthy Marriage: What is it and Why Should We Promote it?” that while he did not mean to “disparage any single-parent families,” the purpose of the hearing was “to determine what the optimal arrangement for families might be” (2004:1). In this same statement Sessions claimed, “We will serve our Nation and the world if we study the issue objectively and takes steps to reverse the trends [of out-of-wedlock births] and prove that the marriage of one man and one woman is and will always be the most ideal framework for a family” (2004:2). Thus for Sessions and others participating in this hearing, discussion of the troublesome issue of single parenthood occurred within the established discourse, which affirms two-parent heterosexual marriage as the universal optimal arrangement for families. At a different hearing, Thompson noted a decline in single motherhood as “progress,” but also pointed out that states needed “the knowledge and tools to implement successful marriage and family formation programs” (2003:94). Like Horn and Sessions, he paid lip service to single mothers when he argued that it was “no criticism of single parents” to recognize two-parent, married families as “the ideal environment for raising children” (2003:94, 93).

Others were less apologetic for their assault on single mothers. Haskins claimed that “the problem” was the more than doubling of the number of children in “female-headed families over the last 30 years” and that “a major contributing factor to poverty is single parent families” (2004:20, 21). Here, Haskins blatantly fingers “female-headed” households as the problem, insinuating that male-headed households are the solution.

Rector argued that “even more important” than strengthening work requirements, “Congress must recognize that the most effective way to reduce child poverty and increase child well-being is to increase the number of stable, productive marriages. In the future, Congress must take active steps to reduce welfare dependence by rebuilding and strengthening marriage” (2002:79). Rector also pointed to the “erosion” and “collapse” of marriage as the cause of many social problems such as child poverty, emotional and behavioral problems, school failure, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, and incarceration (2005:40, 41). Claiming that the government had been subsidizing single parenthood and mitigating the damages that “would have been avoided if the mothers were married to the fathers of their children,” while doing nothing to strengthen marriage, he compared single parenthood to a disease: “It is like arguing that the government should pay to sustain polio victims in iron lung machines but should not pay for the vaccine to prevent polio in the first place” (2005:41). Haskins compared “the explosion of single-parent families” to an act of war because “the nation spends billions of dollars on the excess teen pregnancy, welfare use, and poor school performance associated with the single-parent child rearing” (2005:53-54). These dramatic metaphors exemplify the positioning of single motherhood as an enemy of the State to be feared and destroyed, while ignoring the repositioning of women in the labor force and the family during the late twentieth century within the context of ongoing class, race, and gender inequities. As O’Connor (2001) writes, the analytic framework of poverty research that informed welfare reform ignored racial and class connotations associated with the “unnatural” never-married black “matriarch” and demasculinized “absent father” and “treated the growing concentration of poverty in



nonwhite, female-headed families as a product of life course ‘events’ and individual choices, as though the problem were unrelated to the structural inequalities of class, gender, and race” (254-255).

On the contrary, witnesses like Barbara Whitehead from the National Marriage Project downplayed the significance of structural inequality as a determinant of poverty. Whitehead pointed out that “some researchers now argue that growing up with both married parents in a low-conflict marriage is so important to child well-being that it is replacing race, class, and neighborhood as the greatest source of difference in child outcomes” (2004:19). Though Whitehead did make a point of stating that marriage is not a “magic bullet solution to problems of poverty, disadvantage, crime, and discrimination” and that marriage promotion should not result in a reduction in other supports for low-income families, her overwhelming praise of marriage as an institution that has a “transforming effect on people’s attitudes and behaviors” undermines any intention she may have had not to overstate marriage’s benefits or overlook structural issues (2004:20). In fact, testimonies like Whitehead’s added fuel to the fire for marriage promotion’s strongest government advocates, who favored behavioral over structural poverty solutions. Furthermore, marriage promotion literally redirects funding away from low-income families.

Thus, testimonies that degraded single mothers and endorsed marriage promotion bolstered support for the “common sense” need for government to address problems of family structure and behavior in reauthorization. One such solution was to reduce welfare’s “anti-marriage incentives,” such as the reduction in benefits as income

increases. Rector, who argued that welfare “serves as a substitute for a husband,” called for experimental programs that made all mothers eligible for TANF, food stamps, public housing, Medicaid, and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) regardless of marital status or the earnings of their husbands (2005:42). The point would be to see if more women would marry if they could continue to receive these benefits. In other words, would they change their behavior and make different decisions about marriage? Rector especially was focused on the need to change attitudes about marriage by creating marriage promotion programs that would:

prevent the isolation and poverty of welfare mothers by intervening at an early point before a pattern of broken relationships and welfare dependence had emerged. By fostering better life decisions and stronger relationship skills, marriage programs can increase child well-being and adult happiness, and reduce child poverty and welfare dependence. (2005:43)

Others agreed on the relevance of addressing the pathologies of poor single women by building “skills” and changing minds. Howard Hendrick, Director of Oklahoma Human Services, promoted training for parents prior to childbirth so that they would “have a better understanding, knowledge, and appreciation of the magnitude of their long-term commitment to their children” (2003:50-51). Horn also discussed the importance of conflict resolution and communication skills to marriage (2004). Isabel Sawhill of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, dismayed that once women have had one child out of wedlock, “they appear to be relatively uninhibited about having additional children in the same way,” called for the need “to prevent the initial birth that makes a single woman less marriageable” (2002:128). Sawhill found the cause of single motherhood poverty to be linked to the attitudes and psyche of the women having

children out of wedlock: “Most young women aspire to marry and publicizing their much reduced chances of marrying once they have a baby might make them think twice about becoming unwed mothers” (2002:128). She claimed that along with finishing school and establishing themselves in the workplace, doing both without having a child out of wedlock would greatly increase women’s chances of having a lasting marriage and the chance that “their children will receive good parenting” (2002:128). Not only does Sawhill reinforce popular heterosexist assumptions about women and marriage, her claims associate single motherhood with a lower quality of parenting. Furthermore, honing in on teen pregnancy as a central issue to be discussed in relation to poverty ignores the actual demographic of single mothers on welfare, who on average are “in their late twenties and early thirties with one or two children between the ages of seven and eight” and thus gave birth to their children after adolescence (Segal 2006:269). Teen parents comprised 7.2 percent of all adult TANF recipients from October 2005 to September 2006 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Witnesses like Sawhill decided however that “the message young people receive from society” via programs related to welfare reform reauthorization should be “not just that delaying parenthood is important, but also that children belong within marriage” (2002:128).

### **Marriage as the Solution to Single Mother Poverty**

Thus, with two-parent heterosexual marriage praised as a life goal for women, equaled to education and work, a solution to women’s and children’s poverty in the United States that was taken seriously, reiterated and strengthened in reauthorization was

this: poor women should marry, and stay married, to the fathers of their children so they are not poor. Senator Sessions argued that government should be involved in supporting and promoting marriage because its interests lie in advancing policies to “promote the general welfare,” such as providing home ownership incentives or education loans (2004:2). Senator Michael Enzi declared that “marriage is no longer a moral issue that has no place in the policy realm” but rather is a “significant part of the equation to reduce child and family poverty” (2004:3). Enzi concluded that “supporting the institution of marriage should be a critical component” of TANF reauthorization and that marriage should be regarded as “our way of life” (2004:4). Stuart Miller, Senior Legislative Analyst of the American Fathers Coalition, claimed that “marriage is the most effective tool we have in fighting poverty” (2002:159). John Crouch, Executive Director of Americans for Divorce Reform argued that “Practically all children of divorce are at risk of poverty” and that “Of all the things the Federal Government might do about the compelling national problems of divorce and illegitimacy, providing marriage education through time-tested, proven programs is one of the most judicious, effective, non-divisive, fiscally responsible steps it could take” (2002:139, 140). These kinds of statements depoliticized marriage promotion by couching it in the language of structural policymaking, even as single motherhood was being regarded as a behavioral problem.

Hendrick pressed for more TANF funds to be used for strengthening marriage and reducing divorce nationwide as Oklahoma had done. Pointing to the correlation between Oklahoma’s high divorce rate and low per-capita income, Hendrick quoted an Oklahoma State University economist: “There’s no faster way for a married woman with children to

become poor than to suddenly become a single mom” (2002:243). Rather than examining the non-marital reasons why single women with children are more likely to be poor, Hendrick praised Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating’s knee-jerk response to this correlation, which was to request and secure “an allocation of significant TANF funding,” funding that otherwise could be used for cash benefits or child care subsidies to single mothers (2002:244). Keating’s own submitted statement in a 2004 hearing on marriage confirmed that he had requested ten million dollars in TANF funds to be set aside for the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) and to be used for programs for all Oklahomans, regardless of whether or not they received TANF benefits. These funds paid the salaries of two “marriage ambassadors,” totaling \$250,000, who conducted “relationship rallies” at public schools. The OMI also developed the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), a workshop series for teens and adults in which “participants are presented with religious, moral, psychological, and economic arguments in favor of marriage and are warned about the problems that the Oklahoma officials associate with out-of-wedlock childbirth and divorce” (Smith 2007:175). When promoting training for parents, Hendrick also emphasized the importance of “employment skills, particularly for dads seeking to form or sustain healthy, married households” (2003:50). Rector pointed out that because unmarried fathers’ earnings are on average higher than unmarried mothers’ earnings, nearly 70 percent of poor single mothers would be “immediately lifted out of poverty” (2005:40). The purpose of marriage promotion thus was to restore patriarchal marriage, wherein the man is the assumed primary breadwinner and head of household.

While marriage was promoted as a poverty solution for low-income women with children, what seemed ideal to policymakers and their supporting witnesses, and was reflected in their simultaneous support for work requirements and marriage promotion, was the combined incomes of husband and wife. As David Hansell, Chief of Staff for the Human Resources Administration of New York City's Department of Social Services, put it when discussing fatherhood initiatives and allowing non-custodial parents who are working to be eligible for TANF services, "Research has shown that families are better able to maintain their financial independence when both parents are contributing. By extending TANF resources to both parents of children on welfare, we will enhance the ability of both parents to work and support their children" (2005:82). Horn emphasized that he did not want to "undercut the focus on work" while promoting healthy marriage and family formation efforts. He pointed out that married men and women have been shown to "create more wealth over time, than their single counterparts" (2002:253). Whitehead pointed out that marriage is a "wealth-creating institution, and that is because of economies of scale, access to work-related benefits that a couple might share" (2004:20). In other words, combining resources, especially employment benefits like health insurance that a poor single mother is unlikely to have, is a major benefit of marriage. Of course, the merging of two low incomes is certainly better than one very low income. As Rector noted, unmarried fathers on average earn \$17,500 annually (2005). While Rector was using this figure to make a point about lifting mothers and children out of poverty, this amount is hardly adequate to sustain a family of three or four comfortably. His wife's annual earnings of \$10,000 at a low-wage job, however, would

increase their income to a more comfortable point – that is if both partners are able to maintain their employment, hours, and wages. Most likely, their combined earnings would also disqualify them from receiving state supports. Senator Sessions even remarked that because two-parent families “do not require as many programs covered by tax dollars...Government has a very real interest in promoting marriage” (2004:2). Thus, women’s low-wage labor market participation and marriage to a higher-earning male are promoted as complementary solutions to poverty in the United States, or at the very least, solutions to welfare use. Neither of these solutions addresses the issue of why many more women are poor and earn less in the first place. This logic, which recognizes the fact that men earn more than women on average, rather than addressing issues of gender and racial inequality that affect labor market participation, was reinforced in reauthorization when funding for marriage promotion and fatherhood initiatives was called for alongside stricter work requirements.

### **Child Support Enforcement**

While not everyone was supportive of funding marriage promotion and fatherhood initiatives, improving child support enforcement was widely praised at the TANF reauthorization hearings. Even more so than marriage, however, child support stood in as a substitute for larger structural changes that would address inequalities. As I discussed in Chapter One, under PRWORA an unmarried recipient is required to identify the noncustodial biological parent, often the father, of her child in order to begin the process of collecting child support from that parent, or risk losing a significant portion of

her family's TANF benefits. Feminist critics of mandatory participation in paternity establishment and child support enforcement argue that these provisions are an egregious violation of the privacy rights and self-determination of poor single mothers, in that they subject TANF recipients to a litany of personal inquiries, including those about their sexual histories, as well as genetic testing, and that they increase the risk of financial hardship, emotional distress, and physical abuse, all in the name of reestablishing dependency on a man's wages (Hays 2003;Mink 1998;Smith 2007). Those applying for TANF are required to go through this process without being given a choice in the matter, lest they sacrifice their families' well-being by foregoing cash benefits all together, in an attempt to garner paltry amounts of financial support from the often poor and unemployed biological fathers of their children. Despite this ongoing criticism of child support enforcement as a badly appropriated feminist issue, child support checks became increasingly necessary after the passage of the 1996 law because the new time limits and work requirements meant that many more single mothers, no longer entitled to a steady benefit check, would be entering the precarious low-wage labor market.

Thompson pointed out that child support makes up more than a quarter of the family budget for low-income families receiving it and called child support enforcement a "program that offers a vital connection to a family's ability to achieve self-sufficiency" (2002:338). The Bush administration proposed changing the law so that states were given the incentive to pass more child support directly through to families, rather than using it to recoup federal and state governments for welfare expenses. Referring to such a law already passed in Wisconsin, Thompson said, "Today, more families receiving



assistance are working and the assistance they receive is more temporary. The Wisconsin W-2 waiver demonstration has shown that when TANF families receive the child support paid on their behalf, fathers are more likely to pay child support and to pay *more* child support” (2002:340). The “second prong” of the administration’s child support enforcement strategy was to increase the amount of support collected by taking such actions as expanding the program to deny passports to parents owing \$2,500 or more, previously \$5,000 or more, in past-due support and reviewing and adjusting child support awards every three years to reflect current income. Thompson recognized that:

The five-year limit on receipt of TANF creates a substantially different environment than that which existed prior to PRWORA. At least one review of a support order during a family’s receipt of TANF will help ensure that families leave the welfare rolls knowing that they will continue to receive child support at an appropriate level. (2002:342)

The strong approval at reauthorization hearings for expanding and improving child support enforcement and increasing the amount of support passed through to families maintained mainstream poverty discourse’s prioritization of behavioral over structural poverty solutions, emerging as a response to the realization that requiring work from welfare recipients was not going to be enough.

Savner, while deeming the redirection of TANF funds away from benefits and services to fund marriage and family formation “harmful and counter-productive,” endorsed changing child support rules so that families receive more child support and referred to “consistent and reliable receipt of child support” as “an important work support” (2002:314, 308). Unlike transportation assistance or child care subsidies, however, child support is not directly linked to employment in terms of enabling a person

to work. Referring to child support as a work support links it to employment as a supplement to low wages. Moving more support payments away from state welfare reimbursement and directly to families runs against the grain of the typical neoliberal anti-welfare discourse of the previous two decades, which emphasized cutbacks in social welfare spending, alongside individual accountability; however, this idea materialized as a strategy to offset the low wages of the jobs most recipients were taking as a result of such discourse and its corresponding policy. In fact, child support has become an integral part of the system of supportive services discussed in Chapter Three.

Vicky Turetsky, also a Senior Staff Attorney for CLASP focusing on child support distribution rule reform and concerned with proposals to use child support funds to pay for marriage demonstration programs, argued:

Simply putting parents to work is not enough to help children. If the goal is stronger families and improved child well-being, then increasing family income is an essential part of the effort. Child support is an important source of family income when parents live apart. When the parents do not live together, child support can be a substantial and long-term source of income for low-income working families. Next to the mother's earnings, child support is the second largest income source for low-income families receiving child support. (2002:355)

Turetsky acknowledged the limited role low-wage jobs play for welfare recipients expected to achieve self-sufficiency and pointed to child support as a secondary but crucial source of income and a necessary supplement to low wages. She also pointed to evidence that child support is an alternative to cash assistance because “families are less likely to use cash assistance when they receive child support” (2002:356). As demonstrated in Chapter Three, cash assistance and other low-income welfare benefits have served to supplement low-wage employers, who are not required to pay a living

wage or provide benefits. In the wake of welfare repeal, income from a male breadwinner in the form of enforced child support is a weaker and unguaranteed supplement to enforced low-wage labor market participation. Indeed, hearing testimonies on the importance of improving the child support enforcement system, much like those regarding work supports, stood in for a discourse that challenged the injustices that lead poor single women to rely on a combination of low wages and oftentimes mediocre and intermittent child support payments.

President of the Association for Children for Enforcement of Support (ACES) Geraldine Jensen quoted a former recipient who credited her monthly child support check of \$400, added to her wages from a restaurant job, for making it possible to support her two children. Jensen remarked that “Single parents leaving the welfare rolls rely on child support payments to supplement low wages more than ever before due to welfare reform” and then spent most of her testimony spelling out how to improve the child support enforcement system (2002:146). Marilyn Ray Smith, Deputy Commissioner and IV-D Director of the Child Support Enforcement Division of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue also pointed out that “With time-limited welfare benefits and mandated work requirements, child support is a crucial part of the safety net to keep children from sinking into poverty when their parents separate or never marry” (2003:53). Smith solidified child support enforcement as a key factor in resolving women’s and children’s poverty: “From 1999 to 2001, as these mothers left welfare, we were able to provide them with \$19.5 billion in child support to supplement their paychecks” (2003:57). She argued that because most of the women leaving the welfare roles worked at low-wage

jobs, “Improved child support enforcement for these families can be almost as important as participating in work requirements for making a permanent transition to self-sufficiency” (2003:58). Smith also stressed the importance of paternity establishment cooperation involving medical support enforcement efforts, whereby children leave Medicaid and are covered under their fathers’ private health insurance, citing the millions that Massachusetts saved in Medicaid expenditures. In doing so, she recognized that men’s jobs are more likely to provide benefits and negated the value of a strong welfare state with universal health care coverage.

Smith claimed that providing incentives to caseworkers to collect more and better child support information would further improve on the cooperation of welfare recipients in identifying the fathers of their children: “These caseworkers have obtained outstanding results in moving mothers to work through collaborations with workforce development efforts. They are in an excellent position to explain to mothers the benefits of child support enforcement as part of overall financial planning” (2003:58). Not only does Smith encourage development of a haphazard “financial plan” for poor families, her recommendation for increasing caseworker intervention puts low-income families seeking public assistance at risk. Just as providing incentives and disincentives for moving or not moving recipients into jobs has resulted in many recipients being required to take any job over education or job training, doing the same for gaining cooperation in paternity establishment can result in coercion that would put families back into domestic violence situations from which they had escaped.

This logic persists throughout the welfare discourse, borne of a desperate and shrinking welfare state: Work alone is not going to enable most poor women to achieve economic self-sufficiency, and thus child support must be the other piece of the financial puzzle. Because the incomes of TANF recipients are so low to begin with, the proportion by which their incomes are lifted of course sounds life-changing; in reality however, child support's potential to lift poor families out of poverty is superficial (Smith 2007). As Anna Marie Smith (2007) stresses, "even the best designed child support regime cannot, in and of itself, transform the wage labor market that locks a substantial number of these men and women in the lowest income bracket" (118). Indeed, despite the fact that the State is imposing a "heteropatriarchal model of dependence upon poor women," in recognition of their inability to earn a decent wage, many of the men upon whom poor single mothers are expected to depend, are unemployed, only able to find seasonal and low-wage work, or incarcerated (Smith 2007:118; Sorensen and Zibman 2001).

### **Alternative Perspectives**

As was the case with the discourse surrounding low-wage work and work supports, a few testimonies threatened to interrupt the discourse of individual-level solutions to poverty that fail to challenge the status quo of economic inequality. These women discussed issues that many promoting marriage and child support enforcement did not address, including domestic violence and privacy rights. Rep. Mink's bill, which I discussed in Chapter Three in relation to work requirements, proposed making paternity establishment and child support enforcement voluntary. Mink argued that "This

provision will restore the constitutional privacy rights of poor mothers” (2002:21).

Referring to the PRWORA policy, she said:

To enforce these rules against mothers, TANF requires them to answer intrusive questions that strike at the very heart of privacy guarantees. Child support enforcement should be available to all mothers who want fathers to help financially with children. But mothers should not be compelled to secure child support against their own best judgment. (2002:21)

Mink’s bill also proposed counting treatment for domestic and sexual violence as work activities, stopping the time clock while recipients are undergoing such treatment, and making the Family Violence Option (FVO), which allows states to screen for domestic violence and exempt domestic violence survivors from paternity identification and other TANF requirements that would compromise their safety, a requirement for states.

Albright, whose testimony on work provisions I discussed in Chapter Three, also spoke out against required participation in paternity establishment:

Mothers must not be required to identify the father or sue for child support as a condition of receiving benefits...Many mothers, including lesbian mothers, do not want the father to have any part in their lives or their children’s, often because he is abusive or uncaring; others have worked out their own arrangements. Women in domestic violence shelters say that women often turn to welfare as their only way to leave violent men. To force such women to have contact with these men is to set up women and children for further rape and abuse. (2002:274-275)

Albright’s testimony identifies domestic violence as an issue for impoverished lone mothers and challenges the compulsory heterosexuality of poverty discourse in general and of welfare reform legislation specifically. She also pointed out that some recipients have worked out “their own arrangements” with fathers. Hays (2003) confirms that many women are resentful of the child support enforcement process because it disrupts the

“under the table” support they are already receiving from their children’s fathers or the families of those fathers (81). Thus, Albright undermined mainstream poverty discourse by showing welfare recipients lives to be multifaceted and therefore too complex to “fix” by requiring them to establish financial connections to the fathers of their children.

A few testimonies also challenged the validity of marriage promotion as a solution to women’s poverty. Kate Kahan, Executive Director of Working for Equality and Economic Liberation, argued:

...diverting welfare funds away from direct assistance for families into marriage promotion classes in high schools, abstinence only education, divorce and pre-marital counseling and advertising campaigns touting the benefits of marriage targeted at low-income families will not reduce poverty. Such efforts merely side-step the very real and complex issues surrounding poverty in our country. (2002:263)

Here Kahan challenges a poverty discourse focused on such individual-level solutions as marital relationships. After pointing out that forty percent of children in poverty live in two parent families, she referred to marriage promotion and increased work hours as “oversimplified, band aid approaches to welfare reform” (2002:264). Citing the recent and dramatic rise in the welfare rolls in her home state of Montana, Kahan called for a “more comprehensive approach to welfare reform” that includes policies that “ensure families have options and protection when leaving violent homes and approach family strengthening through actual poverty reduction measures that have been proven to work, rather than involving government in our private lives through economically coerced marriage” (2002:264-265). Kahan’s testimony also countered claims that the government was not coercing anyone into marriage by pointing out that spending funds on marriage

promotion and not structural poverty reduction measures leaves many recipients feeling as if marriage is their only viable option.

Jacobs of Legal Momentum also argued that marriage promotion is not a solution to women's poverty, and like Kahan pointed to economic injustices instead:

Emphasis on marriage and family formation sidesteps the underlying causes of poverty, particularly the poverty of women and children – such as lack of job training and education, ongoing sex and race discrimination, violence and lack of childcare. At a time of huge budget deficits and high unemployment it is irresponsible to spend over a billion dollars on untested, unproven marriage promotion programs, which is what the proposed House bill would spend over the next 5 years. (2005:85-86)

Jacobs' testimony focused on domestic violence as a main cause of women's poverty and referenced studies that have demonstrated that between 15 and 25 percent of the welfare caseload has consistently comprised of "victims of serious domestic violence" and that the abusers are often the fathers of their children (2005:86). Citing surveys of low-income women that show that "two of the four main reasons for not marrying are fear of domestic violence and fear of a power imbalance," Jacobs called for legislation that included protections for domestic violence survivors, which would then be extended to marriage promotion programs (2005:87). Such protections would recognize that the abused are not often willing to disclose their situations to others, and thus marriage and anti-divorce programs need the input of domestic and sexual violence experts when developing and implementing curriculum. Without these types of mandates included in the legislation, "A government message to poor women who are violence victims that there is something wrong with being unmarried will make it even more difficult for women who are trying to leave an abusive relationship to do so" (2005:87). Like Mink,



Jacobs also argued that mandating and funding marriage promotion without also requiring states to adopt the FVO was “both troubling and illogical” (2005:88).

Albright offered yet another perspective – that of welfare recipients with the agency to make their own decisions about intimate relationships:

Women must not be pushed into marriage... We want to marry for love, not for money, and men want to know that we are with them because we love them, not because of the money they earn. Women have fought for several decades for our right to be financially independent of men, and have established the importance of having money of our own as the first line of defense against complete dependence and starvation, and as a protection against violence against ourselves and our children. (2002:275)

Albright offers insight into the lives of women who have counted on receiving welfare benefits, among other sources of income, in order to gain economic independence from men and to support their children on their own. She emphasizes economic security for single women and discusses marriage as a personal choice rather than a public obligation.

In her testimony, Jacobs went on to list the actual reasons why “women, more than men, experience an economic downfall outside of marriage,” such as labor market discrimination and domestic violence (2005:91). Jacobs also noted that women are often the primary caregivers of children, but because they lack employment protections and adequate child care, unemployment and underemployment are inevitable:

Without addressing the factors that keep women from being economically self-sufficient, marriage and family formation advocates are merely proposing to shift women’s ‘dependence’ from the welfare system to marriage. That certainly does not promote individual responsibility, nor is it a policy solution for genuine, reliable, economic security...Economic security is more likely to lead to successful marriage than is marriage likely to lead to economic security. (2005:91-92)

Here, Jacobs recognized one of the contradictions of welfare reform that is central to my thesis argument: promoting self-sufficiency via required work while simultaneously promoting dependence on a male breadwinner. Unlike many of the participants in TANF reauthorization, Jacobs and Legal Momentum neither view the two solutions as complementary, nor validate income from fathers as a substitute for women's independent economic security. This argument also turned the marriage promotion mantra on its head by disputing the claim that marriage is a direct cause of economic security, and instead arguing that marriage is a result of "economically empowering couples" (2005:92).

Sociologist Kathryn Edin discussed the need for any marriage and relationship training to take place within the context of economic empowerment at the 2004 hearing "Benefits of a Healthy Marriage" before the Senate Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy. Edin and her colleagues spent five years conducting interviews with 162 low-income single mothers in Philadelphia and found that, "like their middle class counterparts" poor women and men are not marrying because they feel that they should be economically secure enough to do so:

Until poor, young women and men have more access to jobs that lead to financial security, unless there is reason to hope for a rewarding life pathway outside of bearing and raising children, the poor will continue to have children far sooner than most Americans think they should, and in less than ideal circumstances. Meanwhile, they will probably continue to defer marriage. (2004:18, 19)

Edin's testimony affirms that low-income Americans do not have a culturally-induced, but an economically-induced reason to avoid marriage, rather than stigmatizing them as a homogenized, culturally bizarre sector of the population that needs to be adapted to the

ways of mainstream society. At this same hearing, Theodora Ooms, a Senior Policy Analyst for CLASP, also pointed out that “economic factors such as coping with the multiple stresses of poverty, unemployment, ill health, bad housing, all seriously strain and damage couple relationships and they are often a key reason for the failure of so many low-income parents to marry or stay married” and agreed with Edin’s view that marriage promotion programs needed to go “hand in hand” with improving the incomes, work skills, and housing situations of low-income couples (2004:24). Ooms was especially concerned about spending too much money on unproven programs while other programs for low-income families were being cut; however, Edin and Ooms were up against witnesses like Ron Haskins who spouted statistics that supported funding for marriage over education as a more effective poverty strategy.

### **A Formula for the State**

Along with their emphasis on education and economic opportunity, these testimonies should have delivered the message to Congress that women’s economic independence needed to take precedence over their dependence on men; however, the majority of hearing participants did not acknowledge that these factors should be an integral part of promoting marriage among low-income couples, or that economically coerced dependence on a man via “paternafare” is a violation of poor women’s rights to privacy and self-determination. As Hancock (2004) writes, “the political context within which so-called democratic deliberation occurs is conditioned by monologic, rather than

intersubjective communications among citizens,” or in other words, whoever has the bigger microphone, gets the last word (6-7).

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 provides up to \$100 million in funding per year, for FY2006 through FY2010, for marriage promotion research and demonstration projects and \$50 million per year for responsible fatherhood programs (DRA 120 Stat. 138-120 Stat. 140). The DRA also provides financial incentives to states to pass through more child support directly to families, allowing up to \$100 per month, or \$200 per month to a family with two or more children, while also providing incentives to pass through the full amount. The federal government will no longer require states to pay the federal government its share of the child support payments (DRA 120 Stat. 142- 120 Stat. 143).

Both of these mechanisms applied by the State seek to regulate the intimate relationships of poor women and men in order to superficially compensate for the low wage labor market. As I have argued, the attention they received during reauthorization hearings was a response to concerns over the nature of the jobs that most TANF recipients were taking; however, the intention of the State and of welfare reform’s advocates, was not to ascertain the foolproof formula for poverty alleviation, but a formula of low-wage work and heteropatriarchal dependency that suited the neoliberal State’s interests. While I have found that this is the logic that emerged within the mainstream discourse of TANF reauthorization, it was a logic that justified maintaining the status quo of PRWORA, such as the imposition of mandatory paternity establishment to deter many who would otherwise seek TANF as a means to support their families, so

that the State could continue to abdicate responsibility for its most vulnerable members (Smith 2007:51). The marital relationship, or financial support from biological fathers via a severely disciplinary and punitive child support enforcement system, are intended to stand in for a healthy relationship between the State and the impoverished, which would correct the injustices of the social and economic structures that determine what life opportunities are available by the very intersection of class, race, and gender into which people are born.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusion**

Welfare reform involves an inherent contradiction between the promotion of self-sufficiency via work outside the home and the promotion of dependency on a male breadwinner via heterosexual marriage or child support for poor single mothers. Through an examination of the legislative process leading up to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act's 2006 reauthorization, I found that most policymakers and hearing witnesses did not perceive these two aspects of welfare reform to be contradictory, but rather to be complementary. As the ideology of the work and family ethics continues to constitute the logic of welfare reform and to infuse its resulting discourse, the reality that work alone or dependency on a male breadwinner alone does not reduce poverty for most low-income women and children leads policymakers and their supporting witnesses to press for both simultaneously.

In the course of my analysis, I found that mainstream poverty discourse continues to promote behavioral solutions to poor single motherhood. For example, the repurposing of PRWORA to improve child well-being alone, as if it is detached from that of mothers, invokes an urgency to push through legislation that does not address structural inequalities faced by the mothers of poor children. The perception of children

as the victims of their mothers' life choices legitimizes an antipoverty policy that focuses on adult individual behavior. Thus, much of reauthorization discourse revolved around how far welfare recipients' behavior could be regulated, whether it was how many more labor market hours was reasonable to require so that recipients would improve on their work ethics and become accustomed to a longer work week, or whether marriage could be used to transform attitudes and behaviors so that less poor women have children outside of marriage or pass on a culture of poverty to those children.

Even those witnesses from progressive organizations, who were more sensitive to the challenges faced by welfare recipients under the new law, continued to operate within a limited discourse that failed to address the structures of inequality reinforced by PRWORA. Proposing only short-term poverty solutions like state-based work supports, which are continually underfunded, vulnerable to budget cuts, and unevenly distributed across the United States, and child support, which is unguaranteed and often not sufficient to raise a family, allowed for a discourse focused on recipient behavior to prevail. Regardless of where they may fall on the political spectrum, most did not challenge the time limits and work requirements of the original legislation, and most avoided the reasons why low-income single mothers and even many better-off single mothers struggle: economic opportunity lags behind for women, and inextricably linked to this problem is the cultural expectation that women are the primary caregivers of children and the elderly. Welfare reform reauthorization legislation within the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 ignores the problems and solutions that a few policymakers and

witnesses at reauthorization hearings, such as Representative Mink, Jacobs of Legal Momentum, and welfare rights advocate Albright, tried to bring to Congress' attention.

Due to the profound impact of mainstream poverty discourse on antipoverty policy, welfare reform has not effected structural change with regards to the racial, gender, and class inequalities in the labor market or at home, but instead has constrained more equitable policy responses to poverty. Discourse and policy go hand in hand, and so both must change in order for inequalities and thus poverty to be truly addressed. A change in poverty discourse must precede a change in antipoverty policy. New social welfare policy should be based in a discourse that promotes an understanding that inequality and poverty are entangled. The welfare state must change fundamentally in order to address and to dismantle the sources of structural inequalities, such as neoliberal capitalism and patriarchal gender relations, rather than the individual outcomes of those inequalities.

Both Schram (1995) and O'Connor (2001) call for a need to view discourse and structure as connected. In other words, we must focus on how policy and the language that is used to discuss and create that policy reinforce each other, and only then can we begin to move beyond such a limited discourse. O'Connor argues that poverty researchers must work independently of the State so that they "generate a genuinely independent and critical body of knowledge that aims to set rather than follow the agenda for policy debate" (2001:293). If poverty knowledge is understood as part of larger cultural dynamics and their resulting economic, political, and social inequalities, poverty as a social problem is "de-pauperized" and will be taken seriously as a problem with



structural, not behavioral, roots. Institutions, and not only the individual-level consequences of those institutions, would come under scrutiny and would be targeted for change (O'Connor 2001).

As I have shown throughout my discourse analysis of welfare reform reauthorization, the poor and their work ethics, relationship skills, and other personal deficiencies, not poverty itself, are the targets of discussion. The focus is on enhancing human capital, or the ability of the poor to stretch out their personal resources and to pull themselves up by their bootstraps; however, this approach reaches people unequally, leaving many behind and never dismantling the structures of inequality from which few are able to escape. Katz (2008) argues that advocating for increased human capital via better education for those working in the low-wage labor market cannot be the only goal of an antipoverty strategy because those low-wage job openings will still be there, “waiting to be filled by a new crop of the working poor” (398). He outlines two different responses to this problem. The first is to create policy that changes the labor market so that it no longer perpetuates an artificial distinction between workers who deserve higher wages and benefits and those who do not, and policy that guarantees an annual income. This strategy lacks significant support by political elites and other political actors, as we have seen through examination of the discourse of welfare reform reauthorization hearings. The second response is “to socialize the price of survival by supplementing wages, surrounding families with support services, and opening up opportunities for social mobility through education and training” (Katz 2008:398). As I have argued throughout this thesis, this second solution is limited, especially because it does not take

women and minorities' second-class status into account, and especially because increased education and training opportunities were hardly the centerpieces of welfare reform.

During reauthorization hearings, those who did recognize that work requirements could do nothing to change the nature of low-wage work could not step far enough outside the box of mainstream poverty discourse to acknowledge that advocating for increased work supports and child support enforcement alone continues to place the greater burden of poverty alleviation onto the poor themselves. After a caseworker assesses a TANF applicant and determines her needs for her, the applicant becomes a servant of the welfare state, who must try to collect on those often insufficient, unguaranteed supports, relinquish her constitutional right to privacy and disclose very personal information, put any relationship she may have with her children's father at risk, obtain and keep an inflexible, unreliable low-wage job, and raise her children. Welfare reform policy seeks to put the poor into action, rather than examining the powers behind the welfare state and their role in creating and sustaining poverty (Cruikshank 1999). We must be wary of a welfare state that subjects low-income women to these orders and regulations in order to receive a small short-term benefit check, while excusing the existence of a deregulated labor market that relies on a long-term, steady supply of low-wage workers.

This thesis seeks to contribute to a feminist response to welfare reform. Those working to reform the welfare state so that it addresses inequality and poverty alleviation face many dilemmas. First, while we want to dismantle the current policy with its work

requirements and time limits, we also do not want to restore welfare policy to its previous form whereby benefit checks were just as paltry as they are now without the help of a bolstered work support system. Thus arguments like my own, which point out the limitations of a discourse that promotes the strengthening of the work support system without addressing structural inequalities in the labor market and at home, must take place within the context of smaller, incremental change. Margaret Nelson (2006) argues that while we must continue to fight against the ideological forces behind welfare reform and work for broader social change, we also “must recognize that in an era when welfare reliance so rapidly transmutes into life *without* welfare, we should focus on securing economic stability, benefits, and the right to care for dependants for those who make the transition from state support to ‘personal responsibility’” (62). Her proposals for “modest social change” include a higher minimum wage, supporting “living wage” campaigns, emphasis on the redistributive capacity of the tax system, and the extension of benefits such as Medicaid. She also calls on activist academics to use their knowledge of the welfare system to inform the low-income populations of their eligibility for social programs and to assist people in gaining access to those programs.

Secondly, while advocating for social welfare policy such as work/family balance legislation, which facilitates women’s ability to work both inside and outside the home, we must be cautious not to reinforce cultural expectations that women should be the primary caregivers. Mink (1998) argues that a feminist social policy would need to enhance all women’s choices and opportunities both in the labor market and at home; however, as care giving is afforded more weight as a legitimate form of work, a new

discourse also should inform policy that assumes all adults, women and men, to be primary caregivers and breadwinners. In other words, women should not continue to be expected to “have it all” by doing it all, only with more legislated support.

With so little support and understanding from policymakers, including many of the most left-leaning among them, the revolution to redefine the American welfare state originates outside the hearing rooms of Congress. After a time in the spotlight in the 1990s, welfare reform has fallen back under the political radar, as other issues have come to the forefront of American political consciousness during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Most recently, a faltering economy has inspired some recognition that the U.S. social safety net is seriously lacking and that neoliberal policies that promote deregulation can prove to be destructive. News reports feature families who have suffered the effects of job loss, and point to the increasing demand on social programs and charitable organizations. Missing from the discourse on the troubled economy and its victims, however, is the recognition that our economy has always produced casualties; that even when the economy improves, many people will continue to experience the negative effects of a racialized, gendered, and classed economy; and that the majority of those people will continue to be single mothers and their children. Missing is an understanding that the current economic crisis is part of a larger crisis in the way Americans think about work, family, and responsibility.

As Hays (2003) argues, the image of personal responsibility put forth by welfare reform is one of unfettered and competitive individualism, which upholds the privatization and devaluation of care work and the privatization and deregulation of the

labor market. In turn, it “denies the embeddedness of all individuals in the wider society and their reliance on it” (Hays 2003:216). Hays calls on us to build an “ethic of interdependence” by supporting universal policies and programs that would “serve as symbolic and practical representations of our recognition of human interdependence and our collective commitment to the common good” (237).

Thus, the revolution to redefine the American welfare state, as well as to address the global impact of American neoliberal policies, originates with a reexamination of what American values are and whom they serve. For example, the American Dream, which values individual achievement, has been exaggerated and watered down to purport that even the poorest person will climb the social ladder out of poverty if she works hard and maximizes on her personal talents. This version of the American Dream disremembers that the position into which you are born continues to factor heavily into whether and how much you will succeed. Feminist movements worldwide have demonstrated how gendered, racialized, and classed cultural expectations have limited the life choices and predetermined the life narratives of all people to varying degrees. U.S. feminists need to view poverty as a result of larger cultural dynamics as well and to participate fully in changing its discourse. We cannot commit to mainstream American values that are not infused with a discourse that recognizes and addresses inequalities. We cannot let these so-called values inform social policies that do not challenge inequalities. As long as individual-level, “bootstrap” thinking dominates, we will not venture out beyond our own neighborhoods, our own goals, or our own causes in order to

understand the roots of a single mother's poverty and how her poverty is linked to the many other ways in which inequality manifests itself.

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## **Curriculum Vitae**

Brianne Russell-Morris received a Bachelor of Arts in English, with a minor in Women's Studies, from James Madison University in 2001. She served as an Americorps VISTA at a homeless shelter for women in Boston, MA from 2001 to 2002 and has been employed as a research assistant at Westat, a social research organization, since 2003. Brianne received her Master of Arts of Interdisciplinary Studies, with a concentration in Women and Gender Studies, from George Mason University in 2009.