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# **Poor Women's Education Under Welfare Reform**

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**Abstract: This paper reports the effects welfare reform has on the educational development of 48 single mothers in the Midwest. Findings indicate academic tracking into low skill vocational training programs, the lack of knowledge women have about their rights under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and factors which contribute to low educational attainment.**

## **Introduction**

Shuffled from one set of expectations, which encouraged education, work, and family life to a set of expectations that focuses on work first, quick fixes for employability, and severe sanctions which penalize families, single mothers under the new welfare reform have little or no say in how they would like their lives to proceed. They are mandated and regulated to find work within a two year period when most recipients have neither the educational background necessary to secure living wage jobs nor find themselves in communities that have low skill jobs that will support families without some supplemental assistance.

Under the reform statutes education and training are exclusively targeted to assisting women in becoming "employable" in order to remove them from the welfare system. Simultaneously, the personal, cultural and political aspects of women's lives have been eliminated from educational consideration. This paper reports findings from twenty four hours of small group discussions with 48 single mothers on welfare investigating the influence welfare reform has had on their educational development. Dewey tells us in studying education to study experience since education, experience and life are intertwined while Lindeman contends that education is life.

## **Literature**

Poor women's educational attainment levels are disproportionately low (Barton & Jenkins, 1995), and there is overwhelming evidence of the strong correlation between educational credentials and wage labor rewards (Lerman, September 1997). The link between low levels of education and poverty would seem to call for putting more resources into educational opportunities for welfare women. To hammer home the message that education equals employment the U.S. Department of Labor now breaks down joblessness by educational attainment. Despite these findings, the welfare reform movement denies recipients educational opportunities beyond short term education or training programs while espousing self-sufficiency.

Gwendolyn Mink (1998) contends that the new welfare law stratifies women's rights of vocational freedom under the Thirteenth Amendment, freedom from coerced labor. She further

states that the change in policy disables women's citizenship. Both of these rights are central to the purposes of education. The Work First theme of the reform solidifies poor women's place as dependent citizens.

Women's educational development exists within the larger structures of society and the contextual realities of lived experiences. Mimi Abramovitz (1996), as well as others, critique of the gendered nature of the welfare state points to the contradictory relationship between the welfare state and the dynamics of capitalism and patriarchy. The forces of patriarchy which demand women's unpaid labor in the home keeps them from competing with men for better paying jobs and jobs with more responsibility while the demands of capitalism require a flexible pool of workers who can be pulled into the labor market as needed to keep wages and labor costs down.

Some contend that patriarchal authority and the "family ethic" are stronger than the economic imperatives thus suggesting women must be kept in their place; for poor women that means the place at the bottom of the well. Women who sign contracts under the Personal Responsibility Act (PRA) lose control of their right to choose education and/or training programs that will provide them with the chance to move out of poverty and secure a living wage yet education is the prerequisite for improvement in women's status.

### **Model of Inquiry**

A collaborative research model, designed to engage welfare women in reflective dialogue about their most pressing problems under the reform, was used to collect their stories to more fully understand the effects of welfare reform. By going directly to the women who are impacted by the welfare reform measures I hoped to uncover first-hand information situated in subjectivities, lived experiences, and feelings about those experiences. Small groups of African American, Latina, biracial, and Anglo women, between the ages of 18 and 38, met in two urban and rural communities in Nebraska. They represent some of the diverse faces and circumstances of welfare mothers. Discussions were conducted at a job readiness program sponsored by a community based organization (9 sessions), a community college transition program (3 sessions), and an African American cultural community center (2 sessions) over a period of 16 months to determine what concerns and problems women have regarding TANF. Topics discussed ranged from how they negotiated TANF contracts, time limits, difficult caseworkers, education programs, job readiness and training, childcare dilemmas, to family sanctions. Other concerns emerged from the dialogue such as racial discrimination, and rights and responsibilities under the new social policy.

Several informal meetings with TANF caseworkers were also held to get their perspectives about the education options and work requirements under the new law.

### **Educational Stratification**

Poor women's education for economic development is laid out under the TANF system. Recipients must engage in employment, job search, unpaid work experience, job skills training, and/or approved education for no more than one year with the goal of removing needy families

from government support. Recipients have two year's to become self-sufficient. Findings report the educational stratification that poor single mothers are experiencing.

Academic Tracking. Women recounted academic tracking into low skilled job training that will not lead to living wage jobs rather than degree programs which are the surest way out of poverty. There is a lack of choice in career direction, selecting educational/training programs, as well as being discouraged from being self-directed. Many reported being pushed out of education into short term training, harassed by impossible compliance, and sanctioned if program attendance is not kept up to the required number of hours each week.

Marie was told by her caseworker she already had employability skills, office filing, so she must find a job even though Marie could not make enough to support herself and her two children. Joyce, recently divorced, was told she was too old, at 38, to begin an educational program and she could not use the full two years to attend school. She was told she could take a computer course since she could not return to factory production because of the physical abuse she sustained from her husband. Sarah was told that more education would not necessarily help her make more money anyway and she needed to just go out and find a job. Tara was enrolled in a GED program and job search even though she had not worked previously. Jackie had to hold down two part time jobs if she wanted to continue her program in child development in order to satisfy her caseworker's demand that she had to work. Heather started a vocational program in cooking but once enrolled knew she did not like it; when asked why she didn't change programs she told the group her caseworker wouldn't let her use more than 12 months for training and she would lose the year she already had in food preparation. Vanessa was given the option of one of two 12 month certificate programs in healthcare which still had openings that she could get into right away, even though this was in a job area Vanessa had no interest.

Sarah made it through a two year degree and was working on finishing her bachelors degree when TANF went into effect. She had been receiving assistance for several years as a young mother. Since education does not qualify towards work under TANF Sarah had to find a part time job in order to stay in school. Sarah was working twenty hours, carrying seventeen credit hours plus trying to raise her daughter by herself with no relatives nearby.

Jolene was not so lucky as to be able to stay in school. Jolene was enrolled in college and working towards a bachelors degree when she signed her TANF contract. She, however, was given no option to add work to education. Instead she was required to drop out of school, attend a computer skill upgrade course, and find work since she had "employable skills". As long as she was working she got assistance with child care for her two young children and help with transportation. If she had stayed in school she would not have received either child care or transportation assistance.

Women are being tracked into narrowly defined educational programs, programs that are short term, primarily service oriented, and into positions that will not give them a living wage. Equally problematic is the lack of choice women have over their future vocation. While middle class women are encouraged to follow their interests poor women are told what choices they have, like it or not. At the same time, many women are being directed into and prepared for job fields where there are no positions in the local economies. One woman told of how she had called

numerous medical clinics in surrounding rural communities to see if she could find a job as a medical receptionist without any luck, yet she was mandated into a 6 month program by her caseworker because the program had slots open.

According to caseworkers, recipients have educational options. According to caseworkers, recipients go through an assessment process which identifies their academic skill levels and assists in education placement. According to recipients, there is no choice to enter a two year or four year degree program, nor the option to explore the varied vocational programs offered by the community colleges or other agencies. According to recipients, they do not have the choice of using the full two years for GED preparation or postsecondary education.

Education for economic development is not benefiting the women who must become self sufficient. Lack of choice and academic tracking results in educational stratification whereby poor women do not have the same access, opportunities, and life chances as other women in society.

Education for Political Engagement. Education for political development is often informal, with information passing from one individual to another, or nonformally through community sponsored workshops or discussion groups. Stories told by the women point to the lack of knowledge recipients generally have regarding their TANF contracts, their rights and benefits under TANF, and the appeal process. How is it that women who are held accountable for their every action under a state contract do not know what their rights are under the law? Poor women's civic and political education has been underdeveloped thus allowing the state to intimidate and coerce recipients who unwittingly comply to mandates without full knowledge of their rights. They are made aware of their responsibilities and the sanctions for noncompliance under TANF but only receive information about their rights if they raise questions, and in some cases, only through public advocates.

The vast majority of women in this study did not have a copy of their contract, many did not know what the conditions of the contract were except in broad terms, and for those who did have copies most did not know where the contract was, it had been misplaced. Of the 48 women only two knew all the conditions of their contracts and where they had put them for future reference. Both women were finishing four year degrees started under the old ADC program. Janet, on the other hand, knew what was in her contract but her caseworker had only developed activities for six months. Janet was told to take care of her health, get her teeth fixed, get mental health assistance and attend a computer course. She was worried and anxious about what was going to happen next. Janet had never been on welfare before.

All talked of not knowing what services and support they were entitled to under TANF. In many cases, caseworkers would not offer the various support services unless the recipient specifically asked if she was eligible. During the talk sessions women would tell of their experiences with caseworkers and how they handled specific situations giving other women support to go back to their caseworkers and request benefits or explanations for denial. Dialogue about contracts, caseworkers, benefits, and negotiation processes assisted women in seeing alternative attitudes and approaches to maneuvering through the system. Women were educating themselves.

During the talk sessions it became obvious that most women did not know what recourse they had under the contracts. Contracts are legally binding agreements between, at least two parties, in this case the individual and the state, yet the women did not think of the contract in those terms. Rather they only knew of their obligations under the agreement. As they reflected on the concept of contracts their political awareness heightened. Some women wanted to know how to file a class action suit against the state, others asked if letters to the legislature would help to change things, still others wanted to know how to build a community of welfare recipients in order to build solidarity. All were eager to learn about the appeal and grievance procedures.

Awakening women's political consciousness is an educational process that often occurs in school but is not available under TANF to poor single mothers on welfare.

### **Low Educational Attainment**

The academic tracking and the lack of education for political engagement point to some factors influencing the low level of educational attainment by poor women and are illustrated in the narratives of the women. Being coerced to enroll in education or training programs that are not of one's choice is probably the biggest concern. Many women told of being directed to choose between two or three certificate programs. This illusion of choice maintains control over women. The lack of opportunity to investigate various career options, taken for granted by the middle class, is denied women on welfare because of the ticking clock. Advocates counsel women not to sign their contracts until they have made a decision about what direction they want to go, however, not every woman knows the kind of work she wants to do and benefits begin with the signing of the TANF contract not while one is contemplating career options.

The struggles of parenting alone are commonly known and are documented in this study, yet, despite federal spending there is a tremendous shortage of quality public childcare. Single mothers' educational attainment cannot be separated from their concerns about the quality of childcare and the triple demands of mother, worker, and student. While some single mothers have family to help them with childcare, the majority get only emotional support because of the low wages of extended family members. Some women reported lack of childcare within walking distance to their homes making it difficult for those using public transportation to place their child in a safe environment while they attend training, education, or job readiness programs.

There is an extra burden placed on recipient students who are impoverished, with families to care for, inadequate transportation, and the demands of coursework and homework. Nancy told of her daily schedule which begins at 5:00 AM in order to get her daughter ready for daycare and herself to class by 8:00 AM. Nancy and her daughter live 30 miles from the community college where she attends a restaurant management program. Under TANF she must pick up her daughter from daycare in-between classes and then return her to daycare in time for the next class. This schedule has Nancy running back and forth between the college and the daycare center leaving Nancy to find places where they can go since their home is 30 miles away.

Women perceive that the general public does not understand what it means to be poor and a single mother thus compounding the struggles of being on welfare. Several women also reported the lack of understanding by family members. Scrutinized by the public in grocery store lines

when food stamps are used to family members complaining that nobody pays their rent pressures single mother/students to "downsize their dreams", setting aside studies they hoped would lead them to promising career tracks in order to take whatever work they could find at the moment because they cannot handle the burden (Pierre, December, 1997).

The lack of living wage jobs is, certainly, a disincentive for education. In Nebraska "a single mother with two children needs gross earnings of \$22,000 a year to be economically self-sufficient. That income requires a full time job paying more than \$10.00 per hour, twice the minimum wage" (Funk, February 1998, p. 3). Funk further states that we are likely to promote "working-poverty" rather than economic self-sufficiency. In Wisconsin the percentage of low skill jobs would leave two out of three jobseekers with no job. "There are 73 low skill jobseekers for every living wage entry level job in the state" (Institute for Wisconsin's Future, 1998, p. 3).

The illusion of choice, the concern over convenient quality childcare, the burden of single parenting, the lack of public and family understanding of poverty, and the lack of living wage jobs all contribute to the low educational attainment of poor women.

### **Conclusions**

Poor women's education under welfare reform in this historical moment is reflective of the recurring problematics of gender, race, and class in contemporary U.S. society. The educational stratification and academic tracking of poor women, the overemphasis on education for work only, and the masking of people's civil and political rights point to some of the institutionalized injustices manifesting under the welfare reform and must be investigated more fully. People have been fighting against exclusionary educational practices for many years: the struggle continues.

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