

*“We Knew We Were Somebody”:
Why Women in the Welfare Rights Movement Are Not a Vulnerable Population.
Ann Withorn and Diane Dujon*

The Welfare Rights Movement of the last third of the twentieth century offered poor women a chance to organize, mobilize and argue for their economic human rights. From its earliest days poor women and their allies built the movement from the spirit and the vitality of the Civil Rights era. They debated policy, stood up for each other and tried to keep their “eyes on the prize” of maintaining basic economic viability through an expanding wide range of public assistance programs. Discussions and debates within the movement took up radical questions: was caring for your own children work? why shouldn't the system support women as they go to school and spend their time fighting for their children within the public systems designed to “help” them? Was a basic guaranteed income a viable way to keep public obligations alive and reducing poverty?

This presentation will discuss how much of the spirit and the practical prospects of Welfare Rights was lost with struggles leading up to the passage of the regressive 1996 “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act,” or Welfare Reform. Federal entitlement to public assistance based on children's economic need was retracted and replaced with temporary assistance to needy families while mothers were forced into “any job.” All of what Sanford Schram called the “words of welfare” were used against poor women to deny what they considered their rights to income maintenance: they were made “dependent” by the welfare system that “everyone agreed had failed,” the system had failed and women need to escape welfare, not improve it. Activists found themselves forced into dialogue about how best to move women from “welfare to work” as if this were a simple, desirable goal for all low income mothers.

No longer having the unity of knowing who they are in relation to the state, today poor women find it harder to find each other, much less organize. Efforts to stand up for themselves by demanding what they need are harder to launch in a “civil society” where anger and demands for collective rights are transformed into calls to build “social capital.”

Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn are both long-time activists in welfare rights and anti-poverty movements. We hope to continue to work with others in an interactive way where we combine memories and stories that capture the spirit of a movement with an analysis of how much harder it has become to name and fight poverty. And how the contemporary language serves even to deny its systemic presence. Poor families are seen as “in jeopardy,” or “at risk.” We talk of health and income “disparities” but it is more difficult to find an audience for practical “rights discourse.” We look forward to speaking with feminists and activists about how to bring poor women back into the discussions and the strategizing for change.

Mainly we want to revive a silenced conversation with sympathetic communities