

FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE Women Against Women in the Welfare State

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I would rather have a man worker any day. They, at least, are more likely to listen to you and seem sympathetic. The women are meaner. They act like it's their money and you should work hard like they do.

—Boston welfare recipient

Our office was all women, including the director, and I'll tell you, it was enough to make you hate women. Everybody fought among themselves and hated the director, who was horrible. Then they brought in this nice young man and now everything is much better.

—Suburban service worker

What makes our clinic so wonderful is that it's for women, by women. There is none of that male medical bullshit. We all struggle together to work out better ways to do things. It's not easy, but it is so much nicer not to have men around, laying their ego trips on everything.

—Feminist health center nurse

I just want to be treated like a person, like someone who you think you could be. It makes me so mad when you are supposed to be my ally and you won't look at me, or really talk to me like an equal. Or when you say you will take our "leadership," but only when we agree with you.

—Welfare rights activist

MOST SOCIAL SERVICES TO POOR WOMEN ARE PROVIDED BY female service workers. Together these women most often discuss "problems" identified with women's traditional roles: family difficulties; childcare; "personal" problems with relatives or lovers or with the lack of health care, housing, and income. The help that women workers usually offer is traditional female "nurturing": listening, some

general and specific suggestions, sympathy and, sometimes money and other resources. Both workers and recipients suffer from the low status of being involved with society's "dirty work." Even when clients and workers unite in activist coalitions, most of the people around the tables and on the streets are women. In such an environment, complex relationships often divide women—connections that could, instead, teach important lessons and foster powerful alliances.¹

As a teacher of human service workers and welfare recipients, and as a feminist and an activist, I meet many women frustrated by the gap between their hopes for human services as a base for good relations among a variety of women and by the reality of hostility and distrust among women in the welfare state. Here I examine the relationships among women in the human service world in order to understand better what is so hard and to determine what hope exists for the welfare state as an arena for struggle and change among women from many backgrounds.

The Human Service Arena

Human service work takes place in a variety of settings, which together constitute much of the welfare state. There are the large state bureaucracies: welfare departments, child welfare agencies, state institutions for the mentally ill and retarded—where public employees act like what sociologist Michael Lipsky has called "street-level bureaucrats" by providing the gateway to such essentials as money, public housing, medical and mental health services, or "protective" services to people who are usually poor and are primarily women and their children.² Low-income women usually come unwillingly to such settings because they have few other "private" options, or even because they are mandated to do so by schools or courts.

Many other community-based agencies also provide human services, usually through contracts with the state supplemented by insurance, grants from private foundations, or donated funds. They offer such programs as daycare, counseling, homemaker and adult education services, residential care for retarded and mentally ill people, and rehabilitation services, in settings that often attempt to be more connected to neighborhood or constituency group needs. Finally, a few alternative programs such as battered women's shelters still offer services as a means for making social change. All these services, whether or not they are directly funded by public money

can be considered part of an expansive understanding of the "welfare state." And, for almost every area of service, advocacy coalitions of providers, recipients, and "advocates" exist which try to affect the funding and regulation of services.

It is difficult to generalize about so much activity. On the one hand, agencies differ in their degree of bureaucratization, the professionalization of their staff, and the punitiveness of their function. Both people who receive services and workers tend to view their environment differently across the spectrum from big bureaucracy to smaller agency.

On the other hand, human encounters within most agencies are quite similar, with the possibilities for positive and negative relations present almost everywhere. Even in the most punitive state agency, a woman can appreciate a service worker who "treats her like a human being"; and the most feminist battered women's shelter can foster hostile, untrusting relationships. And, surely, most services simultaneously offer women relief from some aspects of their traditional roles, while also stigmatizing and punishing them for their "neediness."

Since the 1980's, leftist and feminist writers have paid new attention to the welfare state. By now, the best writers have come to see the state as a complex arena for social legitimation and struggles over cultural, social and economic power. This is not the place to review the wide range of extremely stimulating (if often inaccessible) writing which has been both a direct response to the growing assault on the welfare state, and also has emerged especially from feminist historians' examination of the women who built the fundamental policies and programs of the welfare state. However, whether more positive in its presentation of the welfare state's role allowing women to escape the constraints of unfriendly labor markets and families, or more critical of the ways in which women have remained trapped by constrictive programs and policy assumptions, little of the literature has yet reached down to look at how women, as women, actually experience using or working in the services and activities that comprise the state.³

Yet we still need to recognize that, in the day-to-day experiences of women, many of the negative impacts of the welfare state can be thwarted by the self-conscious actions of workers, especially when coupled with well-placed demands by women recipients and advo-

cates. And that even programs that were created based on the most "progressive" principles can become punitive and denying, if workers bring insensitive attitudes. After 25 years in this business, I do believe that it *is* possible for women to emerge from human service encounters more able to cope with their lives, perhaps even to understand and meet their personal and social needs. And the crucial dimension for the successful delivery of almost all human services is the establishment of a respectful relationship between workers and women who receive services. Because of the broader social functions of human service agencies, this relationship usually reinforces and solidifies class, racial, and cultural conflicts in society. But, because of the real nature of the needs women bring to agencies (and despite state efforts to disregard them), sometimes it is still possible for astute women service workers to help women obtain what they need and make new political alliances if they are neither naive about the difficulties nor cynical about the possibilities.

Workers vs. Clients

When service workers first develop an analysis of the potential of human service work, whether on the job or in school, they often decide it should be easy to "correct" things through their own behavior. The basic feminist insight that women can identify with and support one another, as women, seems overpowering. One young radical of the early 1980s expressed hopes similar to those heard at radical conferences from young social work students a decade later:

I started out really naive. I thought that since I understood how we were all oppressed as women, and how the Welfare Department was out to screw us all, then it would be easy for me to work with clients, and with my fellow women unionists. Very quickly I found out that no one trusts me because of these ideas and, worse, that I was reproducing some of the very patterns of insensitivity that I criticized. (1981)

I came to this conference because I wanted to make connections to other social workers and women on welfare. I know if we work together and understand each other better, we can make a difference in the agencies. (1995)

Of course, most service workers don't enter the workplace trying to alter things. Instead, they come with class backgrounds and professional training that already distance them from women who seek services from them, whether they recognize their limits or not.

They are likely to be influenced by all the stereotypes that abound in this society about their separateness from "people in need of service." Other pressures combine to create the complex dynamic which reduces the potential for positive relationships between low-income women and women service workers. First, the power relationships are direct, even in the most "community-based" agencies. Workers are paid to provide services, which clients may or may not even see as needed. In almost all service encounters, even in less punitive agencies, the direct-service worker is the "gatekeeper," the person who can deny or provide needed resources, lessen or intensify state harassment, and in myriad ways affect the quality of life for women who walk in the door seeking help. Clients always recognize the power differentials, even as some service workers may try to deny them. So a simple gender identification between women workers and clients is inadequate. The only way to build relationships is to start with this understanding.

Second, the class and race of many women service workers, as well as their functional roles, pose further objective barriers to solidarity with most low-income women. The classic image of "white, middle-class social workers," removed from their clients' lives and issues, may not be as true in community agencies, but then professional training may step in to reward workers for differentiating themselves from former neighbors. When built-in role conflicts interact with class and race differences, the results can be devastating, even in "alternative agencies":

With us it's intense. All our staff are women of color. The women who come here sometimes expect us to be "sisters," and they get angry when we push them. And sometimes we may expect too much of them. It's better than other places, but the problems sure aren't solved.

Such basic tensions often seem to overshadow any hope for a "contradictory" nature to human service work; the power to hurt seems so much greater than the ability to help. Yet for women service workers honestly to assist other women, much less to build alliances based on recognition of mutual needs and common oppression, the powerful organizational barriers, coupled with class and race differences, must be recognized, examined, and understood.

Besides the material factors of power, class, and racial conflicts, however, there are many mechanisms by which women of all backgrounds have learned to distrust and disassociate themselves

from each other. Despite 30 years of feminist inroads, many women service workers still try to reject any identification with women clients and thereby reinforce client distrust. The cumulative effect leads workers either consciously to reject equal relationships with clients or to act in ways that make such connections impossible, even when workers think they are desirable. As one woman student wrote in a paper examining her work in a homeless women's shelter:

Try as I might, it is hard for me to see women letting themselves go so much. I just can't understand how they get so messed up they lose their children and their dignity. It was easier when I worked with battered women; they were standing up for themselves. It hurts me to see my women so self-destructive. I can't face it some days.

Personally, women service workers face the same structural and psychological constraints as other women workers. They are usually working two jobs—one unpaid as primary family caregiver, the other underpaid. And, while the woman service worker may have chosen her "second job" partly because it builds upon skills learned in her first, that very similarity can be overwhelming. As one child advocate observed:

I love my work but sometimes it is too much. When my own kids are in trouble I often think, "What am I doing here helping someone else's children? I should be home with my own."

This "overdose of nurturance" can be extremely difficult to handle and may lead women service workers, like this counselor, to seem cold toward clients:

Since I had my baby I just don't have as much to give. I used to listen to everyone and be really understanding. Now it's not just the time although that's part of it. It is also that I don't have the same emotional energy to spare. I see myself getting more structured and bureaucratic and it makes me sad, but I don't know how to stop.

Such comments are common even though many service workers also feel that, as women, they are more sensitive to the problems women clients face. Without an overly clinical discussion of the psychological needs service workers project on their clients, I suggest that there may be "a lot going on" in relationships between women service workers and the women they try to assist. Exactly because of the intensity of the issues and problems facing all women, it can be difficult for women service workers to accept differences in women's ways and means of coping.

I call the negative side of this the "who do you think you are?" phenomenon—the tendency of women service workers to judge their women clients more harshly than they would men. These judgments may be based on a sense of what's "realistic" for a woman to do in U.S. society and a fear of the repercussions for any woman who tries to break the rules. They may allow service workers to deny low-income women options that raise questions about the worker's own life choices. According to one feminist welfare recipient:

I think many of my women workers are threatened by my choice to be on welfare, but they cannot admit it. I am saying that I don't want to work at a bad job in order to support my children in poverty, and that I don't want to live with a man to give me legitimacy. Many social workers are in bad, low-paying jobs or bad marriages, or both. I represent a threat to them and they can't admit it.

Or once, in a discussion on recent welfare reform proposals to a "sympathetic" audience of social work students, an earnest young woman queried:

But I know I have to wait to have a baby. I would like to get pregnant but I know that I need to finish school, get a job for a few years and then have my children. It doesn't seem right that women on welfare shouldn't have to make the same choice.

Sexual dynamics may also be at play. Almost any good human service encounter involves highly personal sharing, even if only to determine eligibility. As many feminist service workers have discovered, once the barriers to mutuality are discarded, then sexual feelings can emerge, in both directions. If service relationships become too equal, the potential for more intensely personal, even sexual, interaction arises. While some male service workers may accept and even use this tension, many women service workers may not want to acknowledge their own sexual feelings toward any women, much less women clients. In our homophobic society, this becomes another reason for women in a human service relationship to fear each other.

All told, many service workers share their culture's moral sense about women's proper role. The assumption that women should care for themselves and their families in certain prescribed ways runs very deep in social work and may even stem from the profession's 19th-century feminist roots. The move of liberals toward more conservative notions of "family values" may even have served to reinforce this notion. Even Hillary Clinton now claims *not* to "believe

in divorce." Since most service relationships consider questions of how a woman should perform her basic roles, women service workers may experience constant challenges to their own values. As one child-welfare worker put it:

I know I should be nonjudgmental and I try. But I also care about the kids (that's why I do the job) and the effects on them of troubled mothers. I don't know how to be sympathetic to both mother and kids, even though I am a mother too and know how hard it is for me. So I often act strange with the mother because I feel guilty for her and I don't know what to do about it.

So women service workers may be under great personal pressure to deny the very commonality essential to feminist consciousness. In addition, it can be difficult for them to achieve professional legitimacy within their agency unless they put extreme distance between themselves and their clients. Especially if they have management ambitions, women may find it extremely difficult, except in the most grassroots programs, to connect with clients, or even less "professional" staff.

Professional ideology makes the tensions even worse.⁴ In the absence of a more political perspective, "professionalism" may offer service workers some theoretical justification for avoiding moral judgments, while at the same time setting standards. But overall, professionalism reinforces dominant class and race differences and disallows a politicized and personalized sense of one's work. Finally, a professional identity makes it harder to develop more egalitarian models of connecting. Even though recent approaches that stress the "assets" and strengths of clients are an improvement against older patterns, they all too often still allow professionals to remain as the judges of client's "coping strategies." Seldom are workers encouraged to transcend their "expertise" by simply working with women clients as they would with neighbors or relatives. Women on welfare often deeply resent being "managed" in these ways.

Similarly, standard bureaucratic procedures work against an egalitarian practice. Here many service workers are stuck again. The need to escape from the never-ending nurturance that seems to be their lot as both women and as service workers drives many women to seek limits and clarity in bureaucratic "efficiency." The result, however, can be a withholding, punitive environment, which finally negates the very nurturance that led many women to become service workers in the first place.

Even professional women advocates can fall into traps that distance them from hearing and relating directly to women on welfare whom they honestly believe to be "allies." When confronted with real anger from welfare recipients about their distance, they may psychologize the problem. They may, for example, analyze the tension away by claiming that "after all, in hard times, it is easier to turn on your friends than your enemies," rather than by examining where their own needs for control and authority are part of the problem. Many advocates still find themselves unable to defer to women on welfare about issues central to their lives, when it means that advocates might lose influence with legislators, professional constituencies, or the press. Left unchanged, such patterns defeat the real partnerships so strongly desired by all, and so necessary for change.

The results of all this are often intense and unspoken. Service workers try, consciously and unconsciously, to deal with strong feelings about what women clients can and should do, as well as to consider their own personal and professional options. Recipients feel judged and confused. This situation is surely worse in welfare and mental health agencies, but even contacts that are inherently less authoritarian present the problems one teenage mother expressed:

I don't know what they want from me. At my baby's daycare center they are friendly enough, but then they always make these little remarks that sound like they think I am messing up. It's like they say they are my friends, but I really think they wish I didn't have the baby. So I don't really trust them.

Clients vs. Workers

No matter what the setting, the imbalance of power between women service workers and women clients makes it difficult to see the service encounter as an event in which both client and worker can have impact. But, if a healthy relationship allows for more mutual human services, then we must begin with an honest appraisal of the power of both parties to build such a relationship. So we need to consider the effects of anti-woman attitudes among the women who seek service, without minimizing the primary responsibility of service workers to change the human service environment.

First, there is always pressure for women clients to adopt a "client role," usually marked by subservient behavior, in exchange for "success" in the bureaucracy.⁵ This pressure stems from the state's

fundamentally patriarchal role toward women needing services; indeed, women are "ineligible" for most services if they have a man to support them. This built-in, intuitively obvious "male role" played by the state leads many women to behave quite rationally like "good clients" in the same way they behave like "good wives": they act submissively, manipulatively, or with ostentatious gratitude. One woman put it bluntly:

I'm always playing a role when I go to the Welfare Department. It's like going on a date. I think about what I'm going to wear and how I'm going to act and what I need to do to please them with the least amount of honesty about who I really am.

In behaving this way, women recognize their subservient status and choose to act accordingly. They are often reinforced. In "job clubs," which are set up to help welfare recipients find jobs, members are taught how to "interview well," how to dress, and how to "act motivated" in order to please potential (presumably male) employers. "Good clients" may even find themselves trotted out at press conferences to declare how much they benefited from mandatory work programs. The individual woman who pleases the Welfare Department may even become "queen for a day," receiving media attention and trips to conferences to promote the benefits of compliance.

While such behavior may be a survival strategy for any individual in a specific situation, it is obviously not a model for healthy development nor for activist strategy. What's more, many women find it harder to be a "good client" when they face a woman service worker. On the one hand, sometimes women seem to resent having to play the same dependent role with another woman—"Who do you think she is?" again—and become personally angry with women service workers in ways they are not with "natural" male authorities. On the other hand, some women just expect all women will be alike and are confused and angry when women service workers do not "act differently" from men, without understanding the bureaucratic pressures on women workers. Other women clients may simply be irritated because they assume that it is men, not women, who have real power, and they feel cheated by having a worker who is potentially useful. One older woman was clear:

Oh, my last worker was nice enough, but she had no power. So what should I talk with her? If I'm going to have to deal with any of them, I would rather have it be someone who can do something for me.

When I talked with a group of politically active welfare recipients about their reactions to such feelings, they were torn, just as I was. All felt that women service workers had treated them badly. "They are even less likely to treat me like a person than most of the men are," was the unanimous complaint. Yet all felt somewhat uncomfortable with their bias against women workers. One member of the group expressed the issue quite self-consciously:

I know it's like the old woman-hating stuff, where women don't trust other women. Sometimes I know I want a man worker so I can manipulate him in traditional sexist ways. But I haven't got much power here and I have to use what I've got. Having a woman worker may get in the way. Besides, many women workers seem to resent us, like we're not suffering hard the way they do.

It's confusing. Sometimes I am prejudiced against them or have unreal expectations of them. And then again sometimes they are more difficult to deal with. One thing is true, though. When you get a good woman worker, that's usually the very best. She can really make you feel supported and able to get what you need.

Both recipients and service workers bring bad habits and attitudes as well as reasonable evaluations of power to the human service relationship. Creating a different dynamic requires altered expectations of how women should behave as "clients." Just as there is no obligation to accept racism among white clients toward minority service workers, so clients' anti-woman attitudes need to be challenged, even within the confines of the welfare state.

Relationships Among Women Service Workers

How can you expect us to be concerned about how bad things are for the patients when we are so understaffed that it's dangerous for us? In conditions like these, all I want is to give them enough medications so they don't beat me up.

For female service workers to make alliances with women clients, they must also understand the power relationships that affect their own work. Otherwise, the demands of a system within which they have little power will preoccupy service workers' attention, push them into interminable disputes with each other, and block attention to possibilities for real change.

Many of the same pressures that make it difficult for women social workers to relate well to clients also impede their ability to see the need for aligning themselves with one another. The overload of

nurturance, which they give both to family and to recipients, makes sympathy and support for fellow workers hard to muster. Add the pressures stemming from low pay and low status, and it becomes hard for service workers even to pay attention to one another without irritation, much less to form alliances for change in the quality of service. In addition, the varied and complicated reasons why women may become service workers can create very different expectations among the women in a workplace. One activist in a large private agency summed up the dynamics well:

Here we have a real mix of women. There are a few of the "old guard" unmarried middle-class professionals who see saving kids as their life work and moral duty. Although they are dying out, their spirit judges the rest of us. Then there are the "new breed" of assertive women who see themselves on the way up into successful management positions. They seem almost embarrassed to admit that they are really still social workers. There are also a good many working- and middle-class women who see this as a good job that doesn't threaten their home and family life. And there are a few of us radicals, feminists, who want to talk about unions, or abortion, or alliances with clients, and we threaten everybody else.

Women who self-consciously seek support from other women within their agencies have a particularly difficult time coming to terms with the lack of easy solidarity among workers. They are often able to understand (and seek to change) the power and class divisions between service workers and clients. But they find themselves just impatient and judgmental about similar tensions in the workplace among different levels of staff or among staff of different ages or races. Or, if they start to build connections with fellow workers, they may find that it becomes more difficult to connect to women who come for service:

We have a boss who is a real loser, so I am trying to work with other women staff here to get him out. One of the women working with us has been on staff forever and is key, so we are making headway. But she treats some of the mothers who come here really badly, and I am confused about being too close to her. She really shouldn't be in her job either.

The double standards for men in human services are especially hard to take. Women service workers, for example, may criticize female coworkers if they are unprofessionally "soft" and overconcerned about their clients and coworkers, while male workers

praised if they are ever warm and nurturing. Yet when men do play traditional authoritarian roles, they are seldom criticized, as women are, for being too "hard" or "difficult to work with," as women so often are.

Before women service workers as a group can expect much trust from the women who come seeking service, they must come to terms with differences among themselves. And, before they can hope to work together, in unions or in other ways just to improve their own work lives, they must also examine the power relationships, woman hating, and other pressures that seem to divide them as deeply from one another as they are divided from clients.

Can This Contradiction Be Saved?

As the possibility for providing really supportive services shrinks in the face of shrinking budgets and the public attack on the whole welfare state, politicized service workers and service recipients within the American welfare state wonder what to do. The need for unity among service workers and between clients and service workers seems obvious, but the possibility of achieving it seems utopian. Even worse, the daily struggle to improve things can lead to a deep "burnout" of creative energy and political purpose. Some progressive workers may even begin to "triage" their support for women on welfare: Maybe they can be of more help supporting just battered women, but give up on the losing battle of talking about how all welfare recipients need time and money.

In times like these, we need to remember the tensions that have long been understood by the Left and by feminists. Most human services agencies are created to control and reproduce existing social relations. Agencies quite naturally deliver services that continue oppressive patterns. Services reinforce reliance on men as well as solidifying women's role as society's primary nurturer. This is the nature of modern society. But the capitalist welfare state is also "contradictory." It has also, historically, helped women recipients and workers to break away slightly from traditional roles: by providing recipients with subsistence benefits and services for a life without men and by providing women workers with jobs with enough status and income so that they could gain personal and professional recognition. And, poor and punitive as they may be, its services offer institutional alternatives to some of the nurturing roles demanded so

unconditionally of "good women." One woman expressed the tension with a powerful question:

Why do they make it so hard? Lord knows I need the money and the services I get and I would like to be happier with them. But what I have to go through to get the little they give me makes me wish, most of the time, that I never heard of any of it.

Another woman, off welfare for only two years, asked:

Why can't I remember that I really needed the help? All I think about now when I hear "DSS" is how they made me feel like such a bad mother. But I know that I *was* having problems, and that some of the services—the daycare and even the counseling—did help. But all I remember most of the time is how bad they made me feel about myself.

Statements like these remind us how important it is to change, but not end, the welfare state, as we know it.

For women service workers at all levels the complexity comes around full circle. As the nurturers hired, at inadequate pay, to provide the care that other women have "failed" to provide, they wonder: Should they reject such roles and become male-identified managers? Should they do their job with the self-sacrifice always demanded of women? Or can they foist some nurturing back on women clients? The problem becomes especially complex because, in my experience at least, most service workers and clients do not want to abandon their care-giving roles, on the job or in the home, but they do want recognition and support for performing them. And both need options besides nurturing in their lives, as well as relief from being seen only as caregivers. Again, while this mutual conundrum theoretically unites service workers and clients it does not suggest the basis for any easy alliance.

Yet a few experiences suggest alternatives to the grim scenario. First, we need to return to the lessons learned when women have self-consciously tried to provide services to each other. Although now, in the mid-1990s, most of these programs are gone, except for battered women's shelters, there are books which discuss them and veterans who are around. We need to remember this record of struggle, because, no matter how they have faded, feminist service workers have demonstrated that women can provide effective services from a base of shared experience and feminist analysis. All suggest that fighting the hierarchy among service workers and between service workers and clients is worthwhile, however difficult. Most important,

feminist services provide a model that shows how services can be something valuable in themselves, not merely as organizing tools or as palliatives to an unfair society. One 1970s feminist health activist put it this way:

By working at the clinic I understand better both how bad things are and that there is hope for change. I see how women are hurt in so many ways by doctors, husbands, and lovers who don't understand their needs. I also see that, when we do things differently, when we act differently toward each other and toward women wanting service, things feel different. Maybe we don't have the new answers yet about what to do, but at least it feels like a more equal, more honest way to try.

Second, many women try to use their union or outside advocacy groups as support for engaging in advocacy *with* clients. There are also many progressives in human service unions, even in leadership positions. Some have tried openly to reduce the stresses on service workers so that they can be more sensitive to clients. The social workers' union in Massachusetts, SEIU 509, has established a "women's committee" for women service workers to discuss their work with one another and provide the support that work-place structures deny. Although the committee has not focused as much on relations with women clients as on other concerns, from the beginning members have tried to address common experiences and to fight some of the individualism and elitism fostered by professionalism. Diane Dujon has found that women workers often speak of the need to raise consciousness among women service workers before better relations can reasonably be expected with clients.

In Boston, the women of *Survival News* received funding for "the Jericho Project," which allowed welfare recipients and workers to talk together about their perceptions of each other and to explore policy changes that would allow service workers not to be hostile toward clients. This was a far cry from the days when recipient groups simply demanded that a particular bad worker be fired. The possibility of such discussions, however, depended upon a supportive union, and in bad times union members may vote out leaders who are seen as too "pro-recipient."

Another forum for learning new models may be the advocacy coalitions that have been built in many cities during the "welfare reform" struggles. These have given welfare mothers and social workers new opportunities to work together as equals. If both groups

use such common activity as a way not only to fight cuts but also to explore their trusts and distances from each other, a lot might be accomplished. In the heat of the fray, it might be hard to pay so much attention to process, but my experience in Boston suggests that it is essential to creating mutual trust. Of course, the nature of much social service work means that welfare rights groups will remain frustrated with women service workers. But alliances with the progressive unions and advocates may sow the seeds of new relationships, as one welfare rights activist expressed:

When we marched together to fight the [Welfare] office closing, workers and welfare mothers were walking along together, laughing and joking about the [Welfare] Department, the governor, and our lives. After that it will be a lot harder for workers to treat us like "cases," and for us to see all of them as "the enemy."

It will take such a two-pronged strategy to enable women service workers and clients to understand their intertwined situation. Women service workers, and even professional advocates, will need to overcome their fear of identification with clients, as women, while welfare recipients will need to begin demanding such identification as the starting point for a relationship. As one particularly strong woman expressed:

I've worked hard to train my welfare worker. She now understands more about why I operate the way I do, because I saw my job as getting her to see where I was coming from. Now she calls me to ask what I think of new proposals. I guess she'll leave soon—they always do when they get too good—but I hope she'll take what I taught her on to the next office and I'll just have to start training the next one.

For better and for worse, then, the welfare state (and the human service agencies that comprise it) remains a setting centrally defined by women's roles and women's issues. Whether women come willingly as clients or not, whether they come seeking help to perform traditional roles or because they are being psychologically and materially punished for rejecting such roles, the special nature of women's place in society is the fundamental context for human service activity, for both service workers and clients. As long as the women there are unable to recognize and consider the implications of this shared reality, then women remain divided from one another and "human services" remain associated with punitive, demeaning tasks. If they are able to acknowledge their shared situation, however

then whole new areas for feminist activity may open up. As one woman commented, when asked what she thought of my topic:

I don't know what it means but it's got to matter that we're all women here, and we're always talking about women's problems. If we can figure this out, we may be able to change the way we think about what we ought to do.

Notes

1. This essay was originally published in *Radical America* magazine and has been revised based on 10 more years of activism and listening. The first version grew out of a series of ongoing discussions with and observations of feminist and other service workers in the Boston area. Some of the material used here has been published in my books: *The Circle Game: Services for the Poor in Massachusetts* (Amherst, MA: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1982) and *Serving the People: Social Services and Social Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). My work with progressive human service unionists and welfare recipient groups in the Boston area, and through the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society (a national organization of radical social workers) has also generated some of these observations.
2. See Michael Lipsky, *Street Level Bureaucracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). For a recent book that treats of these same issues, see, Michael Fabricant and Steve Burghardt, *Crisis in the Welfare State* (New York, 1993). Also Theresa Funciello's book, *Tyranny of Kindness*, (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993) offers an incredibly hard-hitting criticism of how workers and administrators manipulate and control recipients.
3. Linda Gordon's book, *Heroes of Their Own Lives* (New York: Viking, 1989) is a notable exception.
4. See Margali Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977) and my book *Serving the People* for more critiques of professionalism.
5. See Funciello for the most recent hard-hitting and perhaps unfair presentation of how clients view "well-meaning" advocates.

be, if attacks on single mothers keep succeeding. In short, it is a way to take more seriously the need to defend the rights of all women, all people, by defending single mothers.

I propose this certificate of study for students and academics to consider, revise, and expand as a way to help them, as faculty and students, understand the issues better and be more able to offer support and to work for serious change. It is a useful starting point for a discussion about the role of the academy. I was going to call it the Single Mother's Empowerment certificate, but I wanted to be empowered to stop talking about empowerment. So I tried to think about another way to support the heroic efforts of single mothers. I decided to build both upon Linda Gordon's concept that poor women needed to be "heroes of their own lives," and to graft it onto the ideas behind the "Mother Hero" awards they used to give in the Soviet Union.

Much as some of the certificate may seem rhetorical, I do believe that if we worked to use it as a base for a real program, and more students gained the knowledge and experience embodied in this certificate we would be doing the work of building a movement for change. In addition, more single mothers who try to attend college would not feel so alone, jumping from ice floe to ice floe. When a woman on welfare, or a struggling employed mother, met a graduate of the certificate she would not encounter suspicion and disregard. Instead, she would find at least one person who would say to her, "Wow, you are a single mother, doing the hardest work of this society all by yourself? You must be incredibly brave and strong, even to attempt that in this unsupportive society. How can I help? You are fantastic!"

Imagine what this would feel like...Just imagine.

The First Mother Hero Award

Presented to a single mother who is a survivor of the assaults on the welfare state while daring to be a champion in the struggle for justice.

In Recognition of the Outstanding Commitment,
Dedication and Hard Work done with and for:
Mothers Struggling Against Poverty

The Mother Hero Certificate

Purpose: To educate and train students (and faculty) to understand, legitimate, support, and defend the women who are responsible for their households as they strive to provide for themselves and their children.

Relationship to Existing Women's Studies Programs: Most of the literature and questions, especially for the first three areas, are often covered in women's studies courses; this certificate only reframes and regroups issues to provide a more focused way of recognizing and defending mother heroes and should be encouraged for all students, regardless of major.

Need for the Certificate: Because of the implications for all women of the full-scale attack on the legitimacy of women's turning to the state for assistance with income and other needs in the face of the profound hostility of the current family system and the existing job markets to women's mothering obligations.

Length of Time to Complete: Initial competence can be gained with one year of focused activity, but the required work of understanding the issues and helping to make change will last a lifetime.

Basic Curriculum Areas: All are required and all intersect. They are probably best presented in the order listed below. An action component is required in every area, along with the required Action Internship.

Mother Heroes 101—How Do You Spell Relief? Recognizing and Legitimizing the Required Work of Motherhood.

- ♦ Content: Focus on the issues for single mothers, but link the issues for all women. The unavoidable necessity of the work of mothering. Theory on the work of care; the discipline of mothering. The importance of time, flexibility, and responsiveness—analogy to agriculture (farming is more than a science, and must be changed given differing conditions). Costs of providing, costs of not providing effective mothering. Racial and class dynamics—whose mothering is valued and whose is not. The implications of doing the work alone—the role of supports from father, birth family, friends, community. Pressures and demands on children and their effects on mothers. Mothering a “special needs” child. Mothering when the streets are unsafe. Views of what constitutes “good mothering” and “bad” in context of basic gendered and cultural constructions. The

opportunities made available by money and the barriers to “good” mothering posed by the lack of it. *Lesson: In this society all mothers are “single” mothers first—they need relief that accepts and does not judge their real situations.*

- ♦ Sources for learning: Sara Ruddick; the “care” writers; writers about the hours of women's work, especially cross-culturally. Many choices here. Films and fiction: especially good for gaining the cross-cultural dimensions. Outside speakers: different types of mothers describe their duties and obligations.
- ♦ Possible learning activities: Spend a day with a mother, or record your own activities—make videotape, interactive compact disc or keep a log. Observe and report on media images of mothers. Pairs of students interview each other about the work of mothering they observed in their lives. As a mother or if you were a mother, what would be your standards of “good enough”? Imagine a rainy, cold weekend with two kids in a three-room apartment on a budget of \$100, \$50, \$25, \$10, \$2—assume minimum basic food in the house.
- ♦ Action goal: Collectively list the 10 things most mothers need to do their work better and possible ways to get each of them. You should pick one (i.e. more time, better workplace conditions, pay for caring work, changed status) as your focus for the certificate and design a personal action plan to be evaluated at the conclusion of the certificate—see below.

Mother Heroes 202. Work Your Fingers to the Bone: Paid Employment as a Source of Relief for Single Mothers.

- ♦ Content: Possibilities and constraints of jobs—wages, hours, working conditions, requirements, and eligibility analyzed in terms of the limits they pose for differing situations of mothering. Who is employed where, under what conditions? What is a “good job, an affordable job” for a single mother and who can get them? Jobs and “benefits”: illusion of dignity without security vs. illusion of security without dignity. Jobs and time for mothering—the chicken pox test. The support networks needed to find, take, and keep jobs. Education and jobs. The appeal and trick of “home work.” The one-job family in jeopardy. Jobs without wives. Racial and cultural dynamics in defining acceptable jobs and offering differing lessons. The changing expectations of “good mothers” as employees as well as mothers. Danger of drawing the line so sharply between wages and the supports needed to allow for employment. Danger of “super woman” myth. *Lesson: Waged employment “as we know it” has failed single mothers; it must change.*

- ◆ Sources for learning: Ammott and Matthaei, Albelda, Rose. A wide range of books and materials on the history of women's struggle to be in, and then survive the workplace are essential to understanding the profound contradictions of the workplace for women. Read about pay equity, mommy tracks, discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. Again, films, documentaries, novels, etc. Bring in single mothers who work in differing types of lower wage jobs to discuss how employment helps them mother, how it makes it difficult.
- ◆ Possible learning activities: Interview parents in the school's daycare center. Visit differing work sites and inquire as to standard working conditions, salary ranges; just observe. In pairs, discuss how you or your mother or close relative/friend manage work and home where the money goes, how much is enough. Make lists of costs and benefits of differing jobs in relation to the work of mothering: Design the ideal "mother friendly" job for someone without a high school degree, whose first language may not be English—compare to options at other educational levels.
- ◆ Action goal: Attend Coalition of Labor Union Women meetings. Work with, or form, Student Mothers group at your school. Work with others on campus to conduct a survey of how your school supports the mothering work of its women employees, and of how it welcomes and supports students who are mothers.

Mother Heroes 303. Intimate Injustices: Men as a Source of Relief for Single Mothers

- ◆ Content: How male roles have changed over time and are different in different cultures. How men help and hinder the work of mothering in U.S. families today. The amount of work most men do in the home; gendered roles. The numbers of divorced and never-married women why and what it means. Measures of male violence and dominance and their effects on families. The effects on women, and their ability to do the work of mothering, of male dominance, violence, and sexual abuse—effect on children of the same. How young girls are raised to submit. How men must change and how society hinders this. The financial meaning of divorce and child support. Mental health issues related to women's inequality in families. Racial and cultural differences are critical here. Economic functions of men; relationship between male poverty and women's options. Supporting men as fathers, without assuming the need to "head" families. Lesbian mothers; what happens without men in the home as an option?
Lesson: The traditional family, as we know it, has failed mothers; it

must be changed.

- ◆ Sources for learning: Stephanie Coontz, Linda Gordon, Nancy Folbre, but again, there is much literature on the functions and failures of the traditional family, but it is being forgotten in these times when we are revaluing families as some people wish they were. See especially the communitarian romanticism regarding family. In addition to all the standards, again films, fiction, poems may be most useful. Speakers from battered women's shelters, divorced women, lesbian mothers, women from different countries and cultures; AFDC mothers talk about the men in their lives.
- ◆ *Possible learning activities:* family histories. Survey of men's and women's work in students' birth families, or adult families. Interview mothers and compare their own economic options to those of the men in their lives—what would happen to each if the union broke up; design a "relationship insurance" policy for mothers—how would risk be calculated? How to set fair pay off rates?
- ◆ Action goal: Work on media campaign for local shelter. Provide girls' empowerment workshops in schools. Prepare an exhibit of the media's view of family life vs the statistics for the school or some other public place.

Mother Heroes 404. Big Daddy: The State as a Source of Relief for Single Mothers

- ◆ Content: Theory of the role of the state in supporting existing hierarchies of class, gender and race while at the same time offering some amelioration. International comparisons are useful. The history of state and societal efforts to help single mothers in U.S. cope has always been a mixture of assistance and control—help when men and job market failed but punished for seeking it and for *being alone*. Early aid and the terms under which "good mothers" received it. What happened to bad mothers. Always best to be widowed or to pretend to be. Never enough money, always huge numbers of controls; women of color were always "bad," AFDC has always been a small percentage of all programs, but the continuing "illegitimate" program. AFDC vs. Social Security. Other policies besides income policies have always been confusing—force poor women to work, don't support middle-class women with childcare, abortion confusions. The bureaucracy has always been fragmented, extensive and intrusive—never a service. Always punitive and increasingly so as two jobs were required, so more mothers are employed and as too many "good mothers" took welfare because they couldn't manage. What's happened to welfare since the failure

of welfare rights organizations to gain guaranteed income, and the removal of elderly and disabled from state-level "welfare." From the "feminization of poverty" to punitive welfare reform. The contradictions and politics of current welfare policy—ideological and fiscal meanings, history of welfare organizing. *Lesson: The welfare state, as we know it, has failed single mothers; it must be changed.*

- ♦ Sources for learning: much material in the past ten years on women, gender and the state. Especially Linda Gordon, Michael Katz, Mimi Abramovitz, Nancy Fraser, Ellwood and Bane, but many others. *For Crying Out Loud* has useful first-hand accounts; *Survival News* does too. There is a great deal of very specific material on AFDC and welfare mother's situations put out by the National Welfare Rights Union, Center for Welfare Policy and the Law, and by local advocacy and legal rights organizations. State welfare departments put out studies. It is always best to invite women who receive welfare to speak; it is good sometimes to invite welfare workers, too. In-class debates among students, or between local administrators and advocates, and highlight the issues.
- ♦ Possible learning activities: Interview family members about their history of receiving any government service. Get all the applicable regulations and try to design a life without breaking any of them. Live on a welfare budget for a month. Visit welfare office and apply for welfare, or just observe in welfare office. Borrow food stamps and buy someone's food.
- ♦ Action goal: Get involved at welfare rights group, or at local poverty program; help recruit student volunteers to help the groups. Create a participatory action research group to monitor and immediately reveal and protest the results and human rights abuses stemming from federal and state "welfare reform." Create a list of positive changes in public programs ("feasible" or not) that could help single mothers.

Mother Heroes 505. Knowing the Enemy: The Cultural and Political Assault upon, and Betrayal of, Single Mothers

- ♦ Content: Examine the numerous sources for the historic and intensified assault on single mothers—religious roots of sexual "morality"; capitalist anti-state opposition to government, especially government that appears to help poor people, women, people of color; misogynist fear of women without dependence on men alone; current labor market's need to have everyone with no option but low-wage jobs;

communitarian retreat into family values. Examine the particular roots of the recent ground swell of opposition and the punitive proposals put forward aimed especially at "illegitimacy," single and teen mothers. Cultural arguments as a closeted way to talk about race. Why is it so widespread? Why is welfare the one failing area out of three that is blamed? The differences between a Clinton (who wants working poor, not paupers,) and a Gingrich (who wants to punish and isolate one of the enemies of a "personally responsible" society, where no one has any legitimate claims for social assistance). Need to reorder and reshape society and deny the pain most people are feeling by using scapegoats. Follow the intellectual arguments to their logical conclusions and build a more clearly authoritarian social state. Put in context of the rise of the Right and the abandonment of liberalism. Consider the popular, "intellectual" and political terms of the debate. *Lesson: Argument and action has to be taken to change the consensus to one where single mothers are valued for doing important societal work and recognized for having a hard time and deserving help.*

- ♦ Sources for learning: All of the materials used in Big Daddy class plus conservative sources from Charles Murray, Lawrence Mead, neoliberals such as Christopher Jencks, Mickey Kaus, William J. Wilson, and Bill Clinton, The Contract with America, Personal Responsibility Act, etc. Watching the talk shows and taping them is useful. Debates are helpful.
- ♦ Possible learning activities: Interview women on welfare, welfare workers, fellow students, family members, and compare views of why people are on welfare, why people are poor, what government should do. In class, work on arguments and information to answer specific questions. Conduct a television and newspaper media watch to keep track of the ongoing coverage of low-income issues. Word games with work, Workfare, welfare, dependency, underclass, intact family, etc.
- ♦ Action goal: Conduct a survey of attitudes on your campus: identify five strategies to affect them, carry out at least one.

Mother Heroes 606: Action Internships: Opportunities for Action Now and Over the Long Haul

- ♦ During the course of completing this certificate, all students will take part in a significant service/organizing internship with an organization that strives to offer better relief to single mothers in one area of life: employment; family functioning; public policy, and services. During

this internship the student should keep a log and analyze what s/he is learning in regard to the issues raised in the certificate. S/he should assess how s/he is changing, the changes s/he sees occur because of the work of the organization, and of her/his own activity.

- ♦ At the conclusion of the internship, the student should submit the log, evaluate the experience, and submit an evaluation of the work from an on-site supervisor (along with her/his own evaluation of the evaluation). S/he should also submit a Future Action Plan for how she will apply the learning of the internship, and the certificate to her/his future personal, employment, and political choices, as well as a proposal for the standards by which s/he would choose to be evaluated.

This proposal is submitted to universities and colleges in the hope that individual students will consider adopting it as a personal curriculum for change and that schools themselves will review its current programs to decide where to house a Mother Hero Certificate and whether some programs might be changed in order to be more supportive to current and future Mother Heroes among us.

NOW IS THE TIME Mainstream Feminism's Statements on Welfare Rights

Martha F. Davis

THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN (NOW) IS THE largest and most enduring of the activist groups founded during the "second wave" of the women's movement. From the start, the issue of women's poverty was given a prominent place on NOW's agenda. At its first national conference in 1966, NOW stated that:

We start with a concern for the plight of women who now live in poverty. The most serious victims of sex discrimination in this country are women at the bottom, including those who, unsupported, head a great percentage of the families in poverty; those women who work at low-paying, marginal jobs, or who cannot find work, and the seriously increasing numbers of high school dropouts who are girls. No adequate attention is being given to those women by any of the existing poverty programs.¹

Indeed, "[a]iding women in poverty and expanding opportunity" was one of NOW's five targets for immediate action.²

Despite this rhetoric, many of NOW's early members lacked personal experience of poverty and brought little understanding to the issue. The strong commitment of a few activists within NOW to identify welfare as a women's issue was seldom translated into national NOW action.

With the latest round of "welfare reforms" in the 1990s, however, NOW members have mobilized at every level of the organization. This reflects a growing awareness of the need to bridge class and racial divides in order to sustain the women's movement beyond its early accomplishments, as well as a reaction to the overtly anti-women sentiment fueling the most punitive reforms.

Beginning in 1991, NOW President Patricia Ireland participated in a series of meetings with National Up and Out of Poverty Now,

RECOGNIZING MOTHER HEROES

*Ann Withorn**

ONE WAY FOR ACADEMICS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, EVEN IN these times of institutional retreat in the face of spurious charges of "political correctness," is for us to challenge universities to take a lead in protecting welfare recipients who attend college. An important way to accomplish this, as women college presidents in Massachusetts and hundreds of other educators across the country are doing, is to lobby directly for programs that support women on welfare when they try to attend college, and to oppose any reform that doesn't allow women to go to college to earn whatever level of degree they can attain. When this happens, as it has in Massachusetts, the debate and policy outcomes are shifted. It is also possible to create state or citywide groups of academics to lobby, coordinate research efforts, and support each other in paying attention to the welfare issue. In Massachusetts we have done this by creating an Academics Working Group on Poverty. But, within universities, some of us can try to do more, just as Oberlin College and Wilberforce and other abolitionist colleges pushed others to oppose slavery a century and a half ago. So, when I speak at universities, I often suggest an academic way we could begin to change consciousness and build a movement at the same time: The Mother Hero Certificate.

Essentially, the Mother Hero Certificate is a serious proposal to universities to train students to value the lives and work of single mothers—and to understand fully and deeply how serious the implications of the assault on all women, all families, all people will

* This is a proposal for universities concerned about supporting single mothers. The author welcomes ideas for changing, expanding, or developing this certificate: Ann Withorn, 617-287-7365, College of Public and Community Service, Univ. of Massachusetts/Boston.