

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.

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; #*

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 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,