

Bad to Worse

Welfare reform and feminist backlash

By Mimi Abramovitz

Welfare is disappearing. By March 1999, the national caseload had plummeted by almost 50 percent from its peak—with more stunning declines in many individual states. In three, the welfare rolls fell by more than 80 percent. In seven others, the decline was more than 60 percent. Only one state—tiny Rhode Island—showed a decline of less than 20 percent.

The shrunken rolls have elicited cheers of success from nearly every politician, policy-maker and presidential candidate. If reduction was the main goal of welfare reform, then reformers can rightfully claim victory. But if welfare reform set out to improve lives of the women and children who utilize it, something has gone dangerously awry. Few observers have noticed—or seem to care—that welfare reform undercuts the ability of all women to secure jobs with decent pay, reproductive freedom, caretaking supports and protection from domestic violence. Indeed, the effort to “reform” welfare comes as part of the wider backlash against the gains made by the women’s movement and the capacity of women to make their own choices about work and family life.

Since its enactment of part of the 1935 Social Security Act, the welfare program has come under periodic attack—largely because it serves women viewed as having departed from prescribed wife and mother roles and therefore “undeserving” of aid. Like now, earlier assaults forced women off welfare by declaring them unmotivated to work, stigmatizing single motherhood and tying assistance to moralistic behavioral standards. Then as now, the racial stereotypes of women of color as matriarchal and promiscuous lurked just below the surface and could not be missed.

The current drive to “reform” welfare began with the 1988 Family Support Act (FSA), which converted Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) from a program that allowed single mothers to stay home with their children into a mandatory work program. By 1992, playing to a decade of economic insecurity among middle-class Americans, politicians found that they could win votes by bashing government programs and the poor. Bill Clinton

rode this “economic panic” into office by promising to “end welfare as we know it.”

In 1994, the Republican Contract with America tried to end welfare altogether by converting it from a federal entitlement program into a state-administered block grant called Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). This historic shift gave the states more power to shape welfare. At the same time, it weakened the entire welfare state by eliminating critical federal supports. Unlike entitlements, Congress can cap the funds of block grants and subject them to annual budget negotiations. With this, the nation’s leaders effectively ended the federal government’s 60-year commitment—however begrudging and meager—to protect the downtrodden.

Can’t make ends meet. The main target of welfare reform was women’s work behavior. By placing a five-year lifetime limit on welfare eligibility (22 states have even shorter limits), the 1996 welfare law transformed AFDC into a temporary and transitional work program. The law upped the number of hours that women on welfare must work, penalized states with too few recipients in work programs, forced those lacking jobs to work off their benefits in menial public and private sector jobs, and otherwise stiffened welfare’s already tough work rules. In turn, local welfare departments cut benefits or closed cases for the slightest infraction of the many new rules, such as missing an appointment with a job counselor.

Many women forced off welfare found work—as they always do when a strong economy creates enough jobs. Even so, large numbers of former recipients now report that they cannot make ends meet. Low wages, part-time work, costly childcare, transportation and work expenses have left many women worse off than when they received welfare. In South Carolina, for example, a study by the National Council of State Legislatures found that 50 percent of the women kicked off welfare fell behind in rent or utility payments compared to 39 percent while on welfare. Fourteen percent said they could not afford medical care now, versus 3 percent before. In state after state—having also lost Food

Stamps, Medicaid and subsidized housing—many women have turned to food pantries, homeless shelters and social service agencies. Increasingly, women find themselves braiding hair, selling fruit by the roadside, providing in-home childcare or resorting to prostitution so their children can eat. This grim picture—which does not include the presumably worse-off women whom the researchers never found—will only grow darker in 2002, when welfare's five-year lifetime limit on benefits goes into effect in every state.

Welfare reform threatens the economic security of poor women first and foremost. However, working and middle-class women cannot rest easy given that welfare reform's time limits, stiff work rules and punitive sanctions help to keep wages low. Welfare reform lowers wages by flooding the labor market with thousands of additional workers. Even under today's more robust economic conditions, an increased supply of labor makes it easier for employers to press wages down for all workers and harder for unions to negotiate good contracts. To the extent that welfare reform has fueled deep cuts in other social programs it also has cost women the public sector jobs that lifted many of them into the middle class.

Finally, punitive welfare cuts affect a large number of women because cash benefits have the potential to boost gender equality. These benefits represent an economic back-up that can lessen women's dependence on men. The resulting autonomy, however limited, makes it easier for women to resist exploitation on the job and harder for employers to keep them in line.

Restoring the traditional family. The explicit goals of TANF also include discouraging single motherhood and encouraging the formation of two-parent families by regulating their childbearing and parenting choices. Federal law now allows state governments to impose a child exclusion or family cap rule that denies aid to children born while their mother is receiving welfare. As of March, about half the states adopted this provision, even though the average welfare family includes only two children—the same as the national average—and despite seven straight years of declining birth rates for teens. A few states experimented with the child exclusion rule before 1996. But Arkansas found no difference in birth rates between women subject to child exclusion and those who weren't. The New Jersey experiment led to lower

birth rates for women on and off welfare, but most of it reflected more abortions by women on welfare—at a time when abortion rates in both the state and the nation had fallen.

TANF also includes an "illegitimacy" bonus of \$20 to \$25 million per year for three years to be shared by the five states that lower birth rates the most among all unmarried women without increasing their statewide abortion rates above 1995 levels. The law also seeks to earmark \$250 million in matching funds for states that run "abstinence-only" programs in the public schools. By March, every state except California had accepted these funds.

Once the government wins the right to control the child-bearing choices of poor women, it becomes that much easier to tamper with the reproductive rights of all women. Welfare reform's regulations already extend beyond women on welfare to every woman. The "illegitimacy" bonus is based on the number of births by all unmarried women in a state. And abstinence-only programs shape the sex education programs available to all children in the nation's public schools, not just those on welfare.



Bill Clinton ends "welfare as we know it."

LARRY DOWNING/NEWSMAKERS

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Parenting. On the untested belief that financial deprivation will motivate "responsible" parenting, many states penalize women who deviate from prescribed behaviors by docking some or all of their benefits. Twenty-one states sanction women if they do not cooperate with paternity identification and child support rules; 17 states dock the check of mothers with truant children or those whose children do not get immunization shots on time. Eight states reduce the grant for missed pediatric health visits, while five states penalize women for not obtaining family planning services. Such sanctions ignore the deterioration of underfunded public schools, the shortage of medical services in poor neighborhoods and the often chaotic nature of life in poverty. Few supporters of welfare reform know—or even ask—how women forced to leave welfare cope with sickness, unpaid bills, kids wanting brand name tennis shoes, men who do not pay child support, and the shame of having to repeatedly ask friends and relatives for time and money.

Nor has welfare reform's "concern" about parental responsibility translated into policies that help women care for their children. TANF's strict work requirements make it

harder for poor women to supervise their children, especially when the women face substandard housing, overpriced food, unsafe neighborhoods and lack of childcare services. Child welfare advocates fear that the combination of deeper poverty, mounting stress and the greater willingness of officials to remove children from their homes will eventually create a tremendous burden on the relatives of poor single mothers and the nation's foster care system.

By insisting that women on welfare must go to work to receive aid, welfare reform downplays the value of the caretaking performed by all women at home. The burden of balancing work and family responsibilities has been worsened by years of cutting housing, health care, childcare, elder care and other social programs, effectively shifting both the cost and burden of caretaking from the government back to the home.

Domestic Violence. Among women on public assistance, 50 to 65 percent women have experienced sexual or physical abuse as adults, usually at the hand of a spouse or boyfriend. Most women deal with abuse by trying to leave. But fears of economic deprivation often frustrate their efforts. When women try to improve their skills, take a job or pursue child support too aggressively, some husbands and boyfriends become threatened to the point where they try to stop women's childcare and transportation arrangements, disrupt their work with harassing phone calls or simply beat them black and blue. Welfare has been one program that made it possible for any woman to escape these dangerous relationships—no matter her income.

To protect women's safety, feminist groups won inclusion

of the Family Violence Option in the 1996 welfare law. This requires states to screen for battering, provide services and waive work and paternity requirements so that the loss of welfare benefits does not force desperate women to accept support from abusive partners. However, many states have failed to enforce this measure. In some cases they claim that women will feign having been battered to exempt themselves from welfare's rules.

Critics say that access to government aid induces "dependency." But welfare rights advocates suggest otherwise. For one, they insist that poverty is the problem and that welfare reform exploits poor women's dire financial situation, forcing them to trade their marital, child bearing and parenting preferences for a welfare check. Advocates also believe that access to income outside of marriage—through employment or government aid—has the potential to increase women's economic independence. This, in turn, can strengthen women's power within the family, increase their leverage on the job, and simply allow women to raise children on their own.

Women on welfare are organizing. There are nearly 200 welfare rights groups across the country working to promote higher benefits, guaranteed annual income and a living wage. We must back these demands—for social policy rarely changes for the better unless pressed from below. ■

Mimi Abramovitz is a professor of social work at Hunter College. She is the author of Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present (South End Press) and Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States (Monthly Review Press).



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Back to the Womb

Chipping away at abortion rights state by state

By Annette Fuentes

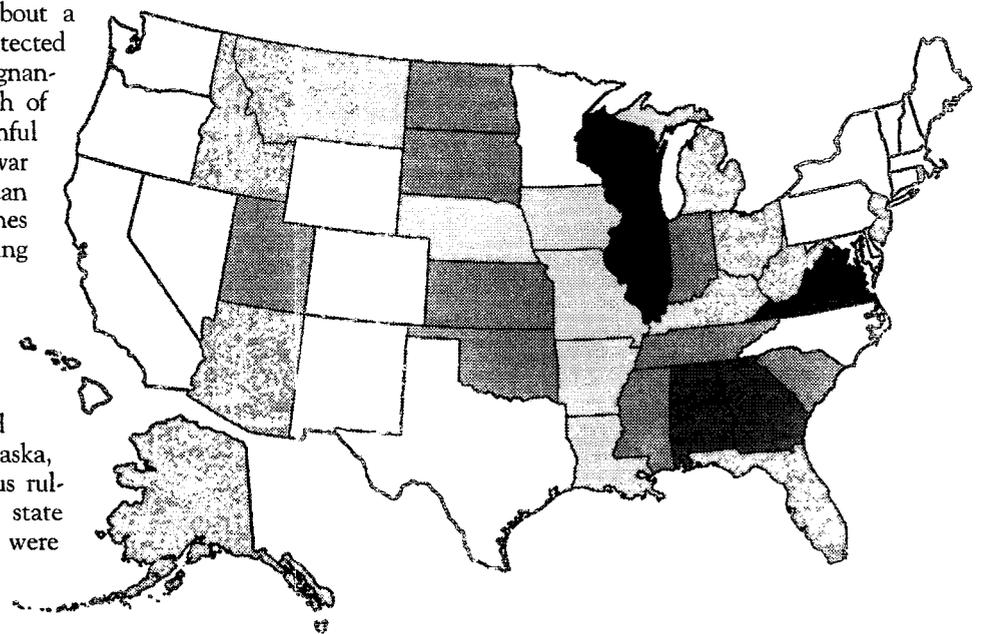
For anyone who still cares about a woman's constitutionally protected right to end an unwanted pregnancy, September was a schizoid month of reassuring legal victories and painful political loss. In the ongoing uncivil war over women's autonomy, both sides can chalk up one, even as the skirmishes over abortion rights seem to be edging toward yet another showdown in the Supreme Court.

On Sept. 24, pro-choice advocates scored a trifecta when the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis overturned the late-term abortion laws of Nebraska, Arkansas and Iowa. The unanimous rulings on the three nearly identical state prohibitions declared that the laws were written so broadly that they would render illegal even common abortion procedures.

Supposedly aimed at banning dilation and extraction abortions—the so-called “partial birth” procedure—the states' laws would place an “undue burden” on women's right to abortion, the appellate panel ruled.

If pro-choice activists couldn't thoroughly savor their win, it's understandable. Just a week earlier, they watched as Missouri legislators overrode Gov. Mel Carnahan's veto of the “Infant's Protection Act.” The state's law was dubbed “atavistic” by Planned Parenthood President Gloria Feldt. Janet Benshoof of the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (CRLP) simply called it the most restrictive abortion law in the nation.

Forget parental consent, mandatory counseling and waiting periods. Those restrictions are kid stuff. Missouri's law gives a legal defense to those who commit violent acts against abor-



The State of Late-Term Abortion Bans

Since 1995, 30 states have passed laws to ban dilation and extraction abortion procedures. Abortion rights advocates went to court in 21 states and succeeded in blocking or limiting enforcement of those laws in 18 states.

-  Bans survived legal challenge.
-  Bans limited by legal challenge.
-  Bans not challenged.
-  Bans blocked by the courts.