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# Exposing and Reframing Welfare Dependency

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*Defining the phrase welfare dependency from a feminist perspective offers a way to understand how the rhetoric around the use of this phrase continues to legitimize current changes in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) while simultaneously diverting the public's attention from the real issues of poverty and discrimination against women. This article includes a detailed definition of welfare dependency, a brief history of its usage, and a reconceptualization of women's use of AFDC on a long-term basis. This reconceptualization expands on international dependency theory and reframes dependency as interdependency that builds on women's strengths, women's rights, and women's role in the public and private spheres. Specifically, it calls for a research and practice focus on understanding the daily lives of individuals and groups of women who receive AFDC on a long-term basis in an effort to understand women's strengths, situations, and needs.*

Although not unique to social work, the language of dependency used by social workers includes phrases such as welfare dependency, drug dependency, chemical dependency, co-dependency, and client dependency. Having achieved the status of common usage, the meanings of these powerful phrases, along with the application of the term *dependency* to certain populations (namely children, the elderly, and women) are now taken for granted in social workers' literature and everyday communication.

Social work, with "roots as a profession primarily of and for women" (Davis, 1994, p. 1) and "the longest historic association with social welfare concerns" of all the human service professions (Romanyshyn, 1971, p. 55) is in a unique position to examine the phrase *welfare dependency* from a feminist perspective. Examining

the social, moral, political, and economic definition of the phrase *welfare dependency* offers an opportunity for reconceptualizing welfare dependency and providing an alternative explanation for long-term welfare use, one that builds on the strengths and interdependencies of women and the welfare system.

### An Examination of the Definition of the Phrase *Welfare Dependency*

Composed of two vernacular words popular for centuries, the phrase *welfare dependency* has escaped definitional development. Rather, since the 1800s, this commonly used phrase continues to serve as political language that legitimizes governmental attempts to solve the "problem" of women's "dependence" on welfare while diverting attention from the real issues of poverty of and discrimination against women (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Zinn, 1984). Political language is "abstract, vague, and simplistic" so that it "sanctifies action" that reinforces certain American values, in this case, independence (Zinn, 1984, p. 32). Since the assumptions behind the political language of welfare dependency are not explicitly stated, both the public and policy makers are left "to interpret the rhetoric in ways that reinforce their own preconceptions about the welfare system" (Zinn, 1984, p. 32). Feminist writers and welfare researchers have begun to question and reframe the political language of welfare dependency (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Zinn, 1984). By exposing the meaning of the phrase, identifying the political interests it serves, and revealing its use as a diversion from the issues of discrimination toward poor women, the implicit becomes explicit.

In welfare reform discussions, the phrase *welfare dependency* is used primarily in reference to women and children who are long-term recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Fraser and Gordon (1994) move from this simplistic definition to an explicit definition of dependency including its racist and sexist stereotypes:

'Dependency' . . . is an ideological term. In current U.S. policy discourse it usually refers to the condition of poor women with children who maintain their families with neither a male breadwinner nor an adequate wage and who rely for economic support on a stingy

and politically unpopular government program called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) . . . [W]elfare dependency evokes the image of 'the welfare mother,' often figured as a young, unmarried black women (perhaps even a teenager) of uncontrolled sexuality (p. 311).

In a similar vein, Bane and Ellwood (1994) admit the word *dependency* has become "synonymous for long-term welfare use" (p. 67–68), and that "[t]hose who are dependent are inactive, ineffectual, and even irresponsible in the eyes of many" (p. 68).

Today, liberals and conservatives agree that welfare dependency destroys recipients' motivation and leads to further isolation and stigmatization (Fraser & Gordon, 1994). Welfare dependency rhetoric from both major political parties suggests that the continual increase of female-headed families and the related increase of poverty among women and children is at least in part due to the existence of a system that provides assistance on a long-term basis. Despite evidence to the contrary (Duncan & Hoffman, 1988; Bane & Ellwood, 1983; Berrick, 1995), politicians and policy makers also use the phrase to imply that recipients caught up in this welfare dependency cycle would rather receive welfare than work. In this view, recipients drop out of school, cheat the government, and bear children outside of marriage for money (Abramovitz, 1994). The pathology of a system that creates dependence is transferred to the recipient within that system, and she is labeled "pathologically dependent" (Jencks & Edin, 1991). This negative stereotyping relates directly to the residual effects of the culture of poverty literature (Rank, 1994) which blamed victims for their own poverty (Ryan, 1971). Blaming both the system and the AFDC recipient herself for the creation of welfare dependency serves to justify the current punitive measures described as welfare reform (Abramovitz, 1994).

One of the main proposed solutions to welfare dependency is work in the paid labor market. Despite research which shows that over 40% of AFDC recipients work at paid jobs either by simultaneously combining work and welfare or by cycling between work and welfare (Spalter-Roth, Hartmann, Andrews, & Sunkara, 1991), false assumptions persist which assert that welfare dependent women do not work and do not want to work. Furthermore,

the assumption is that they will not work unless forced to do so (Mead, 1995). Whatever the intention, rhetoric to "end welfare as we know it" (Clinton, 1994, p. 172) by encouraging work suggests "images of welfare mothers who refuse to work and welfare programs that undercut the work ethic" (Abramovitz, 1994, p. 19).

Welfare dependency is also associated with generational poverty. The term *underclass* is used to describe second-generation AFDC recipients (Jencks & Edin, 1991) who live in female-headed households in neighborhoods characterized by long-term poverty, high crime rates, drug abuse, joblessness, and high rates of school dropout (Abramovitz, 1994; Reischaler, 1987; Rank, 1994). The underclass is supposedly created by children growing up in a home where welfare usage is common and not stigmatized; the presumed outcome is an adult more likely to use welfare. Despite no clear causal relationship between parents' and children's use of welfare and a suggested correlation instead due to lack of continual economic opportunity from one generation to the next (Rank & Cheng, 1995), the myth persists that growing up in a home where welfare is received encourages that child to grow up and receive welfare.

Social services for AFDC recipients have been both praised for preventing and accused of creating dependency. The goal of these services was to reduce rapidly expanding welfare rolls by "strengthening the family life and facilitating self-support" (Abramovitz, 1988, p. 330). Thus, social workers who aid a client in the receipt of AFDC have been accused of creating welfare dependency. The governmental response to the increase in the welfare rolls and the accompanying gains in the area of welfare rights during the 1960s was to focus on the social workers who "represented the dependent poor" by trying to get more money for them, resulting in both the clients and the social workers becoming "dependent on government" (Moynihan, 1973, p. 306). No matter what the intention, social workers and other social service workers are hired to provide services to alleviate dependency while simultaneously being accused of creating it.

Finally, welfare dependency is considered costly. Although most of the core assumptions about AFDC recipients apply to their behavior and their needs, there is purportedly a purely

financial reason to be concerned about long-term welfare recipients: They cost the government too much money. Bane and Ellwood (1983) showed that even though long-term welfare users constitute a 40% minority among the total population of welfare recipients, they receive a disproportionately large amount of AFDC resources over time. These long-term recipients are the primary focus of welfare reform discussions even though they comprise only a portion of the already meager 3.4% average state budget expenditures on all AFDC recipients (Polakow, 1994). This focus simplifies a complex situation and leads to viewing long-term recipients as one group which diverts attention from understanding the differences among the individual women.

### The Evolution of Welfare Dependency

Having identified *dependency* as a key word in U.S. welfare policy, Fraser and Gordon (1994) trace the history of the word *dependency*, beginning with its preindustrial English usage which linked dependency more closely with economic class than with gender and equated it with subordination but not with an individual state of being. Since subordination to lords and masters was the condition of most people, dependency was considered a normal, natural, and non-negative state and independence referred mainly to large entities such as churches or nations. Although the English Poor Law of 1601 distinguished between the worthy and unworthy poor, it neither disapproved of dependence nor praised independence. Rather, this law enforced traditional dependencies by attempting to return poor people to their local independent parishes or communities (Fraser & Gordon, 1994).

With the rise of industrialization, capitalism, and Protestantism came praise for work, wage labor, individualism, and independence. By the mid-1800s, dependency had become a condition more frequently associated with women. Men, primarily white men, became wage-earners with civil and electoral rights. The related notion of civil citizenship meant owning property and earning a wage that allowed a man to support his wife and children (Fraser & Gordon, 1992 & 1994). In an effort to rationalize subjugation and poverty during a time when independence was revered, dependency also took on a moral/psychological

meaning associated with individual character flaws. Dependency became a more gender- and race-specific term as non-wage earners became paupers, colonial natives or slaves, and housewives.

Concern with women becoming dependent on the state originated in the mid-1800s when welfare policy sought to prevent the some potentially deserving poor women from becoming paupers. The U.S. welfare system initially took the form of outdoor relief—non-institutional relief given to those living in their own homes—which continued until the mid-1800s despite the contention that it injured poor people's morals and destroyed their desire to work and be independent (Rank, 1994; Abramovitz, 1988; Handler & Hollingsworth, 1971). Fueled by the disfavor of outdoor relief and the low-cost labor needs created by the rise of industrial capitalism, the nineteenth-century day care nursery movement consisted of private funds to provide mostly freestanding child care facilities so that poor women with children were able to work "under one room, where they could be fed, warmed, and supervised more economically and efficiently" than if they each worked in their own homes (Michel, 1993, p. 281). Purportedly, this arrangement would prevent "pauperization" as women would not become "dependent" on charity, public welfare, or prostitution (Michel, 1993, p. 281 & 283). *Pauperization* became the key word for what today is called welfare dependency.

Following the day care nursery movement, mother's pension programs tried to divert charges that charity/outdoor relief led to dependency. As mother's pensions moved relief from private to public funders, charges that pensions would create dependency now came from government and non-governmental groups (Michel, 1983). Supporters of mother's pensions responded with an argument concerning women's unpaid household labor that evoked the idea of social citizenship which guarantees the social provisions to obtain a decent standard of living and supports the ideas of rights, equal respect, solidarity, and shared responsibility (Fraser & Gordon, 1992):

Denying opponents' charges that the pensions were simply another form of relief (and thus pauperizing), they contended that it was a form of salary or wages for the 'work' of motherhood . . . motherhood had a civic value (Michel, 1983, p. 287).

The argument failed to win approval in the U.S. because the American power structure acknowledged civil citizenship with its ties to ownership of property (including women, children, and slaves) and to contractual exchanges, which was a white male privilege. Contrasted with women's natural, and thus non-contractual, role as wife, mother, and homemaker, the contractual labor associated with civil citizenship was an equal exchange (Fraser & Gordon, 1992). Viewed in the light of civil citizenship, mother's pensions must be viewed as charity—as an unequal and one-way exchange involving a praiseworthy “giver” and a stigmatized “taker.” This “welfare as charity” notion meant that although welfare recipients might deserve compassion, they did not have a right to social provisions. Rather they must bear the stigma of failure for not having a primary [male] breadwinner to provide for their needs (Romanyshyn, 1972).

The dichotomized and separately valued spheres of contract versus charity, civil citizenship versus social citizenship, male independence versus female dependence, and the public wage-earning market place versus the private non-wage-earning household set the stage for a two-tiered welfare system institutionalized by the 1935 Social Security Act. This two-tiered system mimicked the contract versus charity dichotomy. The first tier, similar to contractual relationships, guaranteed social entitlements to wage-earning workers, usually white working-class males. The second tier, similar to charitable relationships, gave aid in the form of pensions to white working-class and poor women with children (Fraser & Gordon, 1992; Nelson, 1990). This two-tiered system, one a more generous first-track for wage earners and the other a stingy second-track for childbearers (Nelson, 1990), differs in that welfare dependency language has been reserved for the second-tier.

The connection between welfare dependency and poor women was solidified with the establishment of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the most controversial public assistance program of the 1935 Social Security Act (Abramovitz, 1988). Like its predecessors, it was conceived as a temporary program of aid to women with children who were without the support of a male breadwinner due mainly to death. Divorced, separated, or never-married women were being ignored (Miller,



1990). They fell into the category of the “undeserving poor”—historically, those who lacked moral character and failed to earn a living due to moral weakness (Abramovitz, 1988; Handler & Hollingsworth, 1971). Thus, the negative view of welfare dependents as undeserving poor women who required long-term assistance was maintained with the establishment of the AFDC program.

The negative rhetoric of welfare dependency increased as more unmarried women and women of color began to apply for AFDC benefits. Much of the growth in the welfare rolls during the 1960s in particular is attributed to the efforts of grassroots welfare organizations such as the National Welfare Right Organization (NWRO). In the 1960s, this national network of local welfare rights groups, who demanded rights such as a living wage and greater access to education, succeeded in dramatically increasing the number of recipients, particularly black women who had previously been systematically denied access. NWRO increased eligibility for AFDC by “forcing the state to acknowledge and act on their entitlement” (Amott, 1990, p. 288). Despite its success, NWRO has received minimal attention from historians and social scientists (Piven & Cloward, 1977). NWRO was composed of poor, black women who used a feminist context in making welfare right demands and promoted raising children as work that deserved to be valued (Amott, 1990; Gordon, 1988).

As more women continued to depend on the state for at least part of their income and to become involved in additional collective organizing efforts (e.g., civil rights, women’s rights, and gay/lesbian liberation movements), the notion of welfare dependency moved from a negative to a toxic state. The Nixon administration’s advisor, now-Senator Moynihan, set the stage for focusing on welfare reform and ending welfare dependency as a solution for social unrest and economic injustice (Quadagno, 1994). Rather than connecting social unrest to high unemployment, poverty, and racial and sexual discrimination, Moynihan (1976) tied it to “the breakdown of the Negro family [which has] led to a startling increase in welfare dependency” (Moynihan, 1967, p. 58). Moynihan and followers proposed that the solution to the nation’s economic woes was to end women’s dependency on the state and increase their dependency on men. This “reform”

continued with the passage of the Omnibus Budget Reduction Act (OBRA) under the Reagan administration in 1981. OBRA restructured AFDC rules, dropping or reducing benefits for thousands of women, especially working women (Quadagno, 1994) and prevented many women from qualifying for benefits (Abramovitz, 1988). Women were to be dependent on men, relatives, employers, professionals, or any combination of the above instead of depending on the state for assistance (Zinn, 1984).

The current welfare reform movement with its welfare dependency rhetoric differs from the previous 25 years of welfare reform efforts perhaps only in the momentum it has gained. Ms. recently reprinted Tillmon's 1973 essay on welfare because of its applicability to the welfare situation today. The late Director of NWRO, which now operates in several cities as the NWRU, Tillmon (1995) articulates the relationship between welfare reform and dependency:

"Welfare is all about dependency. Welfare is the most prejudiced institution in this country, even more than marriage, which it tries to imitate. . . . AFDC is like a supersexist marriage. You trade in a man for **the** man. But you can't divorce him if he treats you bad. He can divorce **you**, cut you off anytime he wants. But in that case, **he** keeps the kids (p. 50).

### Reconceptualization of Welfare Dependency: Focusing on Women's Strengths

A reconceptualization of welfare dependency begins by building on the feminist context of welfare rights started by the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1960s. It combines the feminist values of renaming and defining the personal as political (Van Dan Bergh & Cooper, 1987) with the strengths perspective focus on resources and strengths instead of problems and pathologies (Saleebey, 1992). In a society that assumes dependence on men as women's natural state (Zinn, 1984), views welfare as charity, and defines long-term receipt of benefits as pathological dependence, the very act of applying for AFDC is political (Gordon, 1988). The fact that many long-term adult welfare recipients and their children survive on the very low benefits points to strengths more than to pathologies.

It is essential to articulate an expanded and more accurate definition of the term *dependency* since it continues to be used so frequently in discussing long-term welfare receipt. Sparer (1971) lays out the "real problem of welfare dependency" (p. 71) not as the typical definition of dependency on the welfare check. Rather, the applicant and recipient are dependent on the "whim" of the welfare worker (and the state regulations by which that worker must abide) due to vague and countless eligibility rules, lack of rights including legal redress for the denied applicant or recipient, and agency discretion.

Renaming welfare dependency involves both expanding the existing definition of dependency and altering the meaning by focusing on interdependency. Understanding the nature of interdependency between women and the state, between the public and private spheres, and between welfare and women's rights offers an alternative way of conceptualizing welfare dependency.

#### *Dependency, Interdependency, Women and the State*

The language of the dependency theory of underdevelopment which "attempts to explain the increasing gap between the rich and poor nations" of the world (David, 1987, p. 27) offers an example of connecting dependency to interdependency, which can then be applied to expanding the definition of welfare dependency. Dependency theory, by definition, includes a focus on "the relation of interdependence between two or more economies" (Dos Santos, 1970, p. 231) so that the dominant countries are able to expand and remain self-sustaining in part by exploiting the resources and labor of the "dependent" countries. Applying this idea to the notion of women's welfare dependency means that women "depend" on economic aid from the government; however, the government also "depends" on women receiving AFDC to raise children and perform housework under the stressful conditions created by poverty and, when needed, perform the cheap labor necessary to maintain capitalism.

#### *Interdependency and the Public and Private Spheres*

Although useful for understanding interdependencies between women and the state, dependency theory ignores women's connection to the private sphere. While crediting dependency

theory for recognizing the West's dominance in the world system, with its legacy of imposing colonialism and imperialism, Scott (1995) points out that dependency theory still deals with the public sphere only. The praise for science, technology, and industrialization underlying dependency theory continues to connect development with capitalism and the labor market while ignoring the private sphere—the household.

This extremely voluntaristic depiction of class struggle omits any consideration of the household. It depicts class struggle as occurring in the public sphere populated by men who seek to alter and challenge conditions of dependency. Women remain isolated in the household and thus are not situated to develop a collective consciousness and lack the capacity for organizing opposition to dependency. Challenging dependency is men's work (Scott, 1995, p. 97).

Scott recommends looking at the household and bringing the private into public discussion. This discussion lends support to a revival of the focus on women's unpaid labor. With the current focus for welfare reform on work in the paid labor force, the household has once again been relegated to secondary, if not invisible, status. Fraser and Gordon (1994) suggest that the development of the dependence/independence dichotomy and the predominance of wage labor surrounding this dichotomy has diverted the attention and led to devaluation of women's unwaged domestic and parenting labor.

To discuss women's work in both the private and the public spheres, it is essential to make individual and group distinctions among long-term recipients by addressing their strengths, situations, and needs. Such an analysis can also aid in identifying the similarities and differences between long-term AFDC recipients, short-term AFDC recipients, and women who are not in need of AFDC. Distinguishing long-term recipients who are either working or able to work but lack adequate salaries, child care, transportation, and/or health insurance from recipients who are unable to work due to mental or physical illness, lack of work history, inadequate education or training, or debilitating situations such as current or past abuse serve as a starting point for distinctions. Further scrutiny to determine differences in levels of

familial or community support as well as the amount of unpaid time spent caring for elderly or physically or mentally ill relatives is also necessary.

The research concerning welfare recipients has focused on long-term receipt and welfare dependency issues. In fact, Zinn (1984) suggests that research which uses "length of stay on welfare" as the operationalized measure of welfare dependency serves to reinforce the idea that welfare dependency is a fact. If we really want to end welfare as we know it, we must begin to change our *thinking* about welfare as we know it. Thinking about ways to understand this specific group of women in terms of their struggles in both the public and private spheres may decrease negative stereotypes as well as contribute to meaningful welfare reform. This focus calls for examining issues that relate to long-term poverty: lack of access to financial resources for day care, transportation, and health insurance; low-paying jobs without adequate benefits; domestic violence; sexual abuse; drug and alcohol abuse; lack of access to recovery programs and safe houses; inadequate housing; physical and mental illnesses; and lack of other means to pay for necessary education and skills training.

Long-term thinking about the connections between successful job training and support programs and the necessary support systems for AFDC recipients is necessary. For example, alternatives to low-paying jobs without benefits for AFDC recipients include self-employment programs (Raheim & Bolden, 1995), nontraditional occupations (Weidman, White, Swartz, 1988; Weidman & White, 1985; Pearce, 1994), and jobs that require college degrees. Understanding the conditions needed for women to successfully complete the programs for obtaining these jobs as well as the ongoing support for maintaining the employment over the long run is essential. Research shows a need to provide extensive support services for women in nontraditional job training (Weidman, White, & Swartz, 1988) as well as at the job site itself particularly in the area of dealing with sexual harassment (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 1995; U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1978). Working with women in groups to help them prepare for self-employment is important for the formation of networks between women who will be employed in positions that may isolate them from one another (Raheim &

Bolden, 1995). Successful strategies to move women from AFDC receipt and/or out of poverty on a permanent basis must include strategies for helping women stay employed as well as the initial strategies for helping women find work (Pavetti, 1993).

### *Interdependency of Welfare and Rights for Women*

Advocating for the term *welfare* to be restored to its original meaning connects welfare rights to women's rights. Discussing the "welfare of the community and of the individual good . . . should be a basic tenet of the women's community" (Davis, 1994, p. 105). Sexual harassment, reproductive rights, child support, wages for work, and domestic violence affect all women; however, these issues do not affect all women in the same way. Davis (1994) points out that the ERA and abortion rights, though important, do not directly address questions of access and power necessary for poor women. Tillmon (1995) states that "welfare is a women's issue. For a lot of middle-class women in this country, women's liberation is a matter of concern. For women on welfare it's a matter of survival" (p. 50). Women's liberation is a matter of survival for women who do not "depend" on men:

"Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that survival is not an academic skill" (Lorde, 1983, p. 99).

Returning the focus to welfare rights as women's rights is vital during this period when many of the rights achieved in the 1960s and 1970s are threatened. Grassroots organizers and workers concerned with poverty during the 1970s advocated for rights for poor women which are still needed today: adequate grants, reorganization of the economy to provide decent pay and purposeful employment, professionals providing technical aid and service to organized groups of recipients as opposed to professionals determining strategies to help individual recipients (Sparer, 1971).

Working for welfare rights for women has continued on local and national levels. Professionals and recipients today work together on local, state, national, and international levels. On the

local level, community groups including activist women from both poor and non-poor economic circumstances include the Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL), a Missouri "organization of low-income people and their allies" who work to change public policy particularly related to welfare issues (ROWEL, 1994); Women for Economic Security (WES), a Chicago-based group comprised mainly of long-term welfare recipients working on a local and state level to get people off welfare and out of poverty "through adequate education, training, and supportive services" (O'Donnell, 1993, p. 631); and the Women's Economic Agenda Project on the West Coast whose members have organized conferences with NOW; California's Women's Economic Agenda Project, New Jersey's Together Against Poverty, Wisconsin's Welfare Warriors, and many others (Davis, 1994).

At the national level, feminist researchers and activists have offered proposals to incorporate an employment insurance system into welfare reform and recalculate the standard of need on which state AFDC benefit amounts are based (Pearce, 1994). The National Organization for Women (NOW) Legal Defense Fund has sponsored round tables with academics, low-income women activists, and other welfare advocates (Davis, 1994). Coalitions between such organizations as NOW, the National Welfare Rights Union, and the national Up and Out of Poverty movement are being forged (Davis, 1994).

On an international level, women have been working together for economic, political, and social freedom through the United Nation's conferences for women, the first held in 1975 in Mexico City and the most recent held in 1995 in Beijing, China (United Nations, 1991; Woman's Bureau, 1995). In 1995, priority U.S. issues included a particular focus on economic security and efforts to balance work and family responsibilities (Women's Bureau, 1995). Nichols-Casebolt, Krysik, and Hermann-Currie (1994) call specifically for an international focus by American social workers to "gain more knowledge about the effects of social policy and planning on the lives of women around the world" because of the potential for development as well as further exploitation of women brought about through the onset of a global economy and because of the power held by some women in the United States.

The efforts to build coalitions between poor and non-poor women are moving the focus away from the political language of welfare dependency and returning the focus to welfare rights and connecting welfare issues to women's rights. Calling for compassion and justice, Swigonski (1996) calls for social workers in particular to work in conjunction with welfare recipients in a way that emphasizes interdependency:

Compassion requires work to end suffering and to transform the consequences of suffering. It requires that work to be explicitly grounded in the standpoint of those who suffer and in an understanding of the interdependent relationships that connect all human beings (Swigonski, 1996, p. 106).

Perhaps serious efforts towards poor and non-poor working together to change welfare policy can redress the inequalities created by social welfare professionals (along with politicians and corporations) who have built a welfare state at the expense of welfare recipients. As former recipient, organizer, and special assistant to the Commissioner of New York State's Department of Social Services, Theresa Funciello, has explained, "social welfare professionals became effectively a fifth estate. Acting as stand-ins for poor people in the politics of poverty, they repeatedly traded off the interests of poor people, even as they purported to represent them" (Funciello, 1994).

As women work for welfare rights, the potential to create a welfare system that reinforces strengths increases. Building on the strengths of the AFDC program and the women who utilize it may enable even more women to take risks such as "resisting pressure to take any job at any pay or to engage in activities, such as strikes, that might improve wages and working conditions" or protect against "entering into or remaining in marriages regardless of their safety or security" (Abramovitz, 1988, p. 314). Recognizing that AFDC serves as a second income for poor women (Burbridge, 1994) validates many recipients' resourcefulness when they combine AFDC with paid labor market work, off-the-record wages, and support from family and friends to provide for themselves and their children. Women who receive AFDC for long periods of time are like most women of all classes and educational levels in that they depend on another source of income, such as child



support or a husband's income, along with their own earnings (Gowen, 1991).

### *The Strength of Interdependency Between Women*

Moving away from the patriarchal and pathological definition of welfare dependency and confronting people with more accurate definitions of welfare and dependency and their connections with interdependency leads social workers to "work to validate women's strengths in areas which are central to [our] lives" (Davis, 1994, p. 22). Acknowledging the relationship among women, long-term welfare receipt, and the state and forging connections between welfare rights, women's rights, and women's relationship with both the private and public spheres encourages a more detailed understanding of the women who use AFDC for long periods of time. This understanding can offer ways of shifting the focus away from the political language of welfare dependency and its underlying misogyny. The goal is to move toward solving the real issues which welfare dependency language attempts to hide: poverty and the oppression of women.

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