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A Rainbow of Sisterhood: Women's Workfare, Welfare and Poverty in the United States

In the past few years, the social sciences have largely focused their research on women of all colors and backgrounds. This focus on mothers, workers, retired women and unemployed women is the necessary result of the devastating effect that the neo-liberal policies of globalization had on women, workfare and welfare over the past two decades. The mantra of global competition has increased the intensity and the extension of labor; it has deregulated the labor market, dismantled the public sector, and largely privatized those public assets that are necessary to the reproduction of life, namely public housing, health care, child-care and education. Women have been the most affected by this process, finding themselves with increasing responsibilities both inside and outside the house. This article reviews some of the works that have been most effective in analyzing the ways in which the crisis on workfare and welfare has affected women.

The recent *American Time Use Survey* published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005) reports that over the past 30 years, the amount of hours worked by women outside the house has increased steadily. The report shows that the annual work-load of single women has risen from about 900 per year in 1994, to about 1,200 in 2000, which amounts to two more months of full-time work. The *American Time Use Survey* warned that working women are spending about an hour more doing housework and taking care of family members every day. This means that women are spending more hours at work both in their workplace and in their homes. While their labor and responsibilities grow, women's wages remain stagnant, and still significantly lower than their male counterparts. Forty years after the Equal Pay Act, women are still largely employed in low-wage jobs, and they are over-represented among part-time and temporary workers. As their working conditions become every year more burdensome, the dismantling of the welfare system has also introduced in their life a growing sense of social insecurity.

Mimi Abramovitz shed some light on the state of *Women and Welfare in the United States* (2000). The welfare reform introduced by the Clinton administration in 1996 replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), writes Abramovitz. Such

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reform more than halved the total number of welfare recipients in the nation, most of whom are women. The welfare reform limited the possibility for poor women and poor adults in general to receive aid to only six months in a lifetime; it limited food stamps for single, unemployed adults to three months every thirty-six months, and it prohibited legal immigrants from receiving Food Stamps and Social Security Insurance[1]. Driven by the proclaimed belief that "ending welfare as we know it" is a way to "honor and reward the people who work hard and play by the rules"[2], this reform had dramatic effects on women. From 1994 to 2001, growing proportions of women fell below the poverty-line. A summary of studies completed in nine states reported that "50% of the women studied found themselves behind in rent or utility payments"[3]. Fourteen percent could not afford to pay for medical care. Sixteen percent reported spending periods of time without enough money to buy food. As a result, low-wage women today are unlikely to have access to job-based benefits, and they are often unable to purchase an independent health-insurance.

In their recent: *The Motherhood Manifesto* (2006), Blades and Rowe-Finkbeiner explained that women with low income often do not have health insurance, or access to any paid sick, personal or vacation time at all. This makes women largely exposed to a dramatic phenomenon that is growing in importance in the United States: the likelihood of bankruptcy, or even homelessness, in female-led households with children[4].

Warren and Warren Tyagi *The Two-Income Trap* (2003) warned that having a child is the main predictor for bankruptcy in all US households. Married couples with two incomes and children are more than twice as likely to file for bankruptcy as their childless counterparts, and 75% more likely to have their homes foreclosed[5]. Half of these families filed bankruptcy in the wake of a medical problem: every thirty seconds in the United States, someone files for bankruptcy in the aftermath of a serious health problem. Data released in June 2006 by the National coalition for the Homeless largely confirmed these trends, showing that families with children are one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population in the United States. In 2002, a survey of 25 American cities found that families with children account for 41% of the homeless population[6], due to declining wages and changes in welfare programs. In most households with a double income, having children becomes every year more financially demanding and potentially dangerous to the economic stability of the family. Single women are even more exposed to this phenomenon. In their case, "having a child is now

[1] M. Abramovitz, *Under Attack: Fighting Back. Women and Welfare in the United States*, Monthly Review Press, New York 2000, p. 13.

[2] Clinton 2002, quoted in M. Abramovitz, *op. cit*, p. 13.

[3] *Ivi*, p. 32.

[4] J. Blades and K. Rowe-Finkbeiner, *The Motherhood Manifesto*, The Nation Books, New York 2006, p. 21.

[5] E. Warren and A. Warren Tyagi, *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers Are Going Broke*, Basic Books, Cambridge MA 2003, p. 23.

[6] U.S. Conference of Mayors, *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities*, Washington DC, U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2002, p. 120.

the single best predictor that a woman will end up in financial collapse"[7]. With women's wages so low, and the cost of child care is so high, women are literally dependent on the existence of an extended family network to be able to "afford" raising their children. For single mothers without a family, working in low-income jobs means spending most of their wages for childcare. It is not uncommon that single working women must live in shelters to afford childcare, or they must choose between feeding their children, paying the rent, or paying for healthcare or childcare. It is sometimes necessary for them to choose between feeding their children and buying the necessary medicines for them. In this context, it is no surprise that many women end up on the streets, or that single mothers, and children make up the largest group of people who are homeless in rural areas.

The US Bureau of the Census report on *Income, Poverty and Health Insurance in the United States*, explained that in 2005 the majority of the homeless shelter residents were not unemployed people, but working women and men who are often employed in more then one job. Today, children are the segment of the US population with the highest poverty rates: more than 35.3% of the persons living in poverty in the United States are in fact children. More than fifty percent of children living in families with only a female householder live in poverty. According to 2005 US Census Bureau data, poverty is slowly becoming a "multicolored" phenomenon. While historically poverty has been largely (although not only) a non-white phenomenon, today the pauperization of women cuts across all racial backgrounds. Today, black households still have the lowest median income among all racial groups. However, the poverty rate among African Americans has remained largely unchanged at 24.9% for the past several years. The poverty rate among the Hispanic population has also remained stable at 21.8%. What is changing is the poverty rate among white women. According to the US Census Bureau, it is the rate of white American women living below poverty that is rising the greatest among all racial group[8]. Almost thirty percent (29.3%) of white women earns wages that are either at, or below, poverty. In this context, the "feminization of poverty" is slowly becoming a prerogative of all low-wage women: while white upper-class women still enjoy the highest income and privileges among all racial groups, the average income of white low-wage women is falling, and slowly converging with the incomes of their other racial counterparts. Across races, low-wage women are largely employed in the same low-skilled, low-wage jobs: they are nannies and domestic workers; cashiers and waitresses; or factory workers.

For many years, domestic labor has been a prerogative of African American women. As Audre Lorde observed:

> I wheel my two-year daughter in a shopping cart though a supermarket in Eastchester in 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's chart calls out excitedly: 'Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid[9].

[7] E. Warren and A. Warren Tyagi, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[8] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Income, Poverty and Health Insurance in the United States: 2004*, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Income Statistics, 2005.

[9] A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, The Crossing Press, New York 1984, p. 126.

Today, more and more white women also work as domestics; and more and more low-wage women also have to hire nannies in order to compensate for the lack of child care.

In their article on *The Welfare Nanny Diaries,* Sen and Thompson recently told the story of Sandra and Tanisha, two low-wage black women that work respectively as a childcare provider and a payments operator at the Bank of America's office in the World Trade Center. Sandra and Tanisha are both from the same neighborhood, both black, both single mothers, and both poor. Sandra works as a nanny for Tanisha when she's at work. Sandra is a caretaker, a teacher, and an educator for poor children. Every day, Sandra looks after the kids of several single women in her same economic condition, in what it is a lower class attempt to compensate for the shortage in welfare. Sandra is a "poor mother's nanny": she looks after a number of kids that ranges between six and fourteen, since her clients cannot afford to pay her minimum wage, as so often they themselves do not receive it. Together with the "rich mother's nannies, Sandra works long hours for very low-wages. In general, the working conditions of domestic labor are still very difficult in the United States.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Domestica: Immigrant workers cleaning and caring in the shadows of affluence,* focused on Hispanic women working as domestic workers. The author provides a grim portrait of domestic workers in the US. Excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which requires that employees receive at least the minimum wage for all "hours worked" plus overtime pay for all hours exceeding the standard 40-hour work-week; and excluded from the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which protects employees' rights to unionize and collectively bargain, domestic women are largely overworked and underpaid, and often denied the payment of overtime hours and the right to unionization. On top of these conditions and their physical labor, there is a great amount of emotional labor. As this worker says, many times their privileged employers would not speak to them:

> They would say nothing, absolutely nothing to me! They would only speak to me to give me orders." […] "Sometimes she wouldn't speak to me the whole day... she'd act as if I was a chair, a table, as if her house was supposedly all clean without me being there[10].

In 2001, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimes* provided a similar portrait of domestic workers. This time, she described the relationship between the white housekeepers and their white employers. Working undercover as a housekeeper to see for herself what the working conditions were like, Ehrenreich described their labor with these words:

[10] P. Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Domestica: Immigrant workers cleaning and caring in the shadows of affluence*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2001, pp. 197-198.

> ours is a world of pain – managed by Excedrin and Advil, and compensated for with cigarettes and, in one or two cases and then only on weekends, with booze. Do the owners have any idea of the misery that goes into rendering their homes motel-perfect? Would they be bothered if they did know […] that their floors are cleaned only with the purest of fresh human tears? [that] it's the world wide working class who quarried the marble, wove your Persian rugs until they went blind, harvested the apples in your lovely fall-themed dining room centerpiece, smelted the steel for the nails, drove the trucks, put up this building, and now bend and squat and sweat to clean it?[11]

The situation is similar in the service sector for waiters and restaurant employees. Katherine Newman *No Shame in My Game* describes the labor conditions of black women working in Harlem. Central Harlem is one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City: there, 40% of the households are below poverty-line[12], and the ratio of applicants to available jobs is 14:1: "for every fortunate person who lands one of these minimum wage jobs, there are thirteen others who walk away empty-handed"[13]. Given the high rates of unemployment, having a job in Harlem is considered a fortune that bares a high price. Fast-food workers here are willing to accept salaries as little as $4 an hour for a job. They are willing to endure long workdays in the hardest conditions. "Jobs held by the working poor often subject them to physical danger, and their elevated rates of on-the-job injury reflect the risk"[14]. "Noise, pollution, stress and violence"[15], lack of vacations and irregular incomes affect their family life and children[16]. In short, "decaying housing, poor diet, lack of medical attentions, lousy schools, persistent insecurity"[17] put "Harlem's working poor [...] perpetually one pay check from the disaster"[18] Newman talks about low-wages, long hours, elevated rates of on-the-job injuries; lack of vacations; decaying housing, poor diet, lack of medical attentions, lousy schools, and persistent insecurity.

Similarly, Ehrenreich talks about waiters sleeping in trailers and hotels; eating chips and coffee; and keeping themselves up with pills of Advil. Often times, these workers are:

> poor in all the hard-to-miss, stereotypical ways. Crooked yellow teeth are one sign, inadequate footwear is another. My feet hurt after four hours of work, and I wear my

[11] B. Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Henry Holt and Company, New York 2001, pp.89-90.

[12] K. S. Newman, *No Shame in my game: the working poor in the Inner City*, The Russell Sage Foundation, New York 1999, p. 62.

[13] *Ibidem.*

[14] *Ibidem.*

[15] *Ivi*, p. 205.

[16] *Ivi*, p. 203.

[17] K. S. Newman, *op. cit.*, p. XV.

[18] *Ivi*, p. 53.

> comfortable old Reeboks, but a lot of women run around all day in thin-soled moccasins. […] Underneath those vests, there are real-life charity cases, maybe even shelter dwellers[19].

> Although no one, apparently, is sleeping in a car, there are signs, even at the beginning, of real difficulty if not actual misery. Half-smoked cigarettes are returned to the pack. There are discussions about who will come up with fifty cents for a toll […]. One of my teammates gets frantic about a painfully impacted wisdom tooth and keeps making calls from our houses to try to locate a source of free dental care...[20]

Ehrenreich concludes that poverty among women today is a real disaster: "by almost all standards of subsistence," it is a "state of emergency".

> It is common, among the non poor, to think of poverty as a sustainable condition [...]. What is harder for the non poor to see is poverty as an acute distress: the lunch that consists of Doritos or hot dog rolls leading to faintness before the end of the shift. The "home" that is also a car or a van. The illness or injury that must be "worked through" with gritted teeth, because there's no sick pay or health insurance and the loss of one day's pay will mean no grocery for the next. These experiences are not part of a sustainable lifestyle, even a lifestyle of chronic deprivation and relentless low-level punishment. They are, by almost any standard of subsistence, emergency situations. And that is how we should see the poverty of so many millions of low-wage Americans: as a state of emergency[21].

The 2006 AFL-CIO survey *Ask a Working Woman* warns that the situation of women in the United States is gradually deteriorating. The survey conducted in June-August 2006 by the AFL-CIO asked more then 26,000 women to share their concerns about the state of working women in the United States. "They responses and comments paint a troubling picture of the struggles of today's working women"[22]. Working women worry about their work. Almost all of them (97%) are "very concerned" that health care is becoming unaffordable. They worry about the rising cost of child-care, living and education. They worry about scarcity of retirement and benefits. When asked about their worries, this is what some women said.

> We are one accident away from homelessness. I own a home, I make decent pay, but if I am out of work for more then three months, my son and I are on the street. We shouldn't have to live like this, especially when I work so hard[23].

> As someone at the younger end of the baby boom, I'm afraid for my future and that of my children. I live paycheck to paycheck. I have a college degree. I used to think I was middle class, but now I feel like I'm working poor [24].

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[19] B. Ehrenreich, *op.cit*,, p.175.

[20] *Ivi*, p. 89.

[21] *Ivi*, p. 175.

[22] AFL-CIO. 2006. *Ask a working woman survey report*. Retrieved November 6. Available http://www.afl-cio.org/issues/jobseconomy/women/speakout/upload/aawwreport.pdf., p. 1.

[23] AFL-CIO. 2006, *op. cit*, p. IV.

> Imagine getting the kids ready for school while you take your shower and dress. One child is coughing. You go to work for 8 hours and pick up the kids. He's still coughing. You go to the drug store for cough medicine. You bought the food yesterday you cook for dinner tonight. You wash at least one load of laundry every night. You read a bedtime story to the kids. Your second child is coughing. You don't stop for 16+ hours. Now, tell me, do you need help with child care, medical expense and some vacation time?[25]

> Most of us are one negative event away from poverty. Even women like me: I have a Ph.D. but can only find part-time teaching jobs. If my husband dies before I do, I will be destitute[26].

As this worker declared:

> Things have gotten so bad for all working Americans that it's not even about women's issues anymore. Worrying about women's issues is a luxury we hope to have again some day. Right now, it's about basic issues of health care and job security that affect all working people[27].

In the United States, things have gotten "so bad" for working women that many of them are "one accident away from homelessness". Even workers with college degrees or Ph.Ds are "one negative event away from poverty." The AFL-CIO report shows that most women are concerned about "basic issues" like health care and job security. In the land of opportunity, women's priorities seem to have become disturbingly basic. And these results are not limited to one particular group of women: they are consistent across different age groups, and they are consistent among different races. Today, the overwhelming majority of US working women seem to have similar problems and priorities. White, African American, Hispanic, Asian and Native American working women demand largely the same things: healthcare and job security, as the AFL-CIO reports. The homogenization of women's working conditions is rapidly decreasing women's standards of living in general. It is increasing workfare and job-insecurity. It is showing the oneness of needs that characterizes women. And for the first time in history, it is tearing down the walls of racial segregation that traditionally characterized the women's labor movement.

In the past few years, new bonds of solidarity have emerged amongst women of all racial backgrounds in their quest for women's rights. The interracial women's movement extends from the garment industry to the service sector, from domestic workers to mothers, from unemployed women to retired women, in a powerful rainbow of sisterhood. The garment industry is one of the most important sectors in the United States, and it employs primarily migrant workers. Building on the infamous case of El Monte sweatshop, when state and federal officials raiding the San Gabriel Valley found seventy-two Asian American immigrants who had been forced to work an average of 18 hours a day, every day, for seven years, a group of Asian American UCLA students detailed the working conditions of Asian

[24] AFL-CIO. 2006, *op. cit*, p. IV.

[25] *Ivi*, p. II.

[26] *Ivi*, p. 8

[27] *Ibidem.*

American women in the Los Angeles Area. Their *Sweatshop Slaves* shows how the current working condition of Asian American women in the Garment Industry is still a case of contemporary slavery. Recently in New York, Latina and Chinese women have come together to speak out about the sweatshop conditions in the garment industry: from long hours, with no overtime pay, to padlocked bathrooms. "I thought America was a very advanced country, but working in the sweatshop here, I see that the garment industry is very backward compared to Hong Kong"[28], said one worker.

In 2001, Miriam Ching Yonn Louie defined these women as *Sweatshop warriors*. In New York, Asian and Latin American garment workers organized a boycott campaign against DKNY and filed a class action lawsuit for wage violations, winning compensations for an estimated $1 million dollars. Similarly, Latina women organized a fight for just wages at the Levis Strauss plant in Oakland. Ching Yoon Louie also tells the story of "Fuerza Unida," a group of laid-off workers composed of "early victims of NAFTA"[29] that demanded better working conditions and benefits in the plant, gaining the support of other women's groups throughout the nation, and managing to organize a boycott that gave national visibility to its discriminatory labor practices. At the same time: many Chinese, Korean, Thai, Filipino and Latin American organizations of women from New York, Texas and California have been playing a key-role in the women's movement of the garment sector. Ching Yoon Louie describes the experiences of la Mujer Obrera in Texas; the Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA) in New York; the International Ladies Garment Workers Union; and the Korean Immigrant Workers' Advocates in California. Starting from the nine-month strike of 1991 organized by la Mujer Obrera to the more recent victory in New York, these workers have literally shaken the garment industry and challenged the patriarchal system in their families, their unions, and their workplaces.

In a similar way, Hondagneu-Sotelo *Domestica* tells about the Domestic Workers' Association (DWA), a group formed and run by domestic workers to help nannies and caregivers defend their rights. This group is an outgrowth of CHIRLA, the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, and its members are domestic workers from the Philippines and other South Asian countries, Eastern and Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Latin America and Canada. Similarly, the DAMAYAN is a Migrant Workers Association based in New York that promotes the rights and welfare of Filipino domestic workers, and collaborates with a South Asian Workers, Haitian Women, and immigrants of all nationalities. Then there are the thirty-eight Mexican laundry workers who went on strike in a northern Chicago suburb in 2001 to gain union representation and receive better wages, benefits and working conditions. The home laundry workers employed at New England Linen in Connecticut, that recently started a fight for union representation. There are the members of American Federation of Teachers Local 4, that just won a new one-year contract that ended a nine-day strike whose success

[28] M. C. Yonn Louie, *Sweatshop warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take on the Global Factory*, South End Press, Cambridge MA 2001, p. 50.

[29] *Ivi*, p. 206

largely depended on the solidarity of the union, and the support that students and parents gave to the teachers. Or the group of Service Employee Union 32BJ members in Philadelphia, that marched to defend area standards for office cleaners on Aug. 31. In all these movements, women are in the front-lines, and their struggle for better working and welfare conditions is inspiring all workers.

Miriam Ching Yoon Louie uses the word "warrior" to describe these garment workers. A multi-racial group of single mothers from Milwaukee also defines single mothers as "welfare warriors": women that fight against poverty and strive to give a better world to our children. As Alice Walker acknowledged a few years ago, these mothers, wives, single women and retired women are ordinary heroes that "hold up half the sky" with their labor. These women "wash and iron"; clean and cook; and struggle everyday with their hands and fists, "knowing so well what today we must know" even "without knowing a page / of it / themselves"[30].

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[30] Walker, quoted in *But Some Of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women's Studies*, ed. by G. T. Hull-P. Bell Scott-B. Smith, Feminist Press, New York 1982, p. XIII.

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