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Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights

Premilla Nadasen

The recent dismantling of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the federal safety net for poor women and children, has taken place with relatively minimal protest and outrage. Local welfare rights organizations planned demonstrations, the National Organization for Women (NOW) launched a day of protest, and a network of mostly academic women known as the Committee of 100 lobbied Congress and organized a picket at the White House. Progressive think tanks and public policy institutes expressed concern about the turn of events. But compared with the response from women nationwide when the legal right to abortion was threatened in the late 1980s or when Anita Hill charged Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas with sexual harassment, the end of welfare as we knew it became reality with a disheartening measure of public apathy.

The lack of protest suggests that welfare, although it is the main economic support for women in need in the United States, is still not considered by most feminists a women's issue. At the same time, civil rights organizations, seeking to challenge white Americans' conflation of poverty and race, have been reluctant to make African American welfare mothers symbolic of the Black plight. And working-class movements have historically focused on workplace issues, distancing themselves from the non-wage-earning poor. These strategic choices and the deeply embedded negative stereotypes of women on welfare that permeate American culture have made welfare a difficult and unlikely issue around which progressives can organize. Yet, despite the difficulties of recruiting allies to their cause, poor Black women, along with other women of color, have fought for decades to demonstrate the connections among race, class, and gender injustice and to use the demand for



Photograph by Philip A. Greene.

welfare rights as a vehicle for developing feminist theory and action. The welfare rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s provides one example of this phenomenon.

The feminist politics of the welfare rights movement were perhaps best summed up by Johnnie Tillmon, AFDC recipient and welfare rights organizer since the early 1960s. Tillmon's 1972 *Ms.* article, "Welfare Is a Women's Issue," reflected the long struggle to define the welfare rights movement as a part of the larger women's movement. Tillmon wrote:

The truth is that AFDC is like a super-sexist marriage. You trade in a man for *the* man. But you can't divorce him if he treats you bad. He can divorce you, of course, cut you off anytime he wants. *The* man runs everything. In ordinary marriage sex is supposed to be for your husband. On AFDC you're not supposed to have any sex at all. You give up control of your own body. It's a condition of aid. You may even have to agree to get your tubes tied so you can never have more children just to avoid being cut off welfare. *The* man, the welfare system, controls your money. He tells you what to buy, what not to buy, where to buy it, and how much things cost. If things—rent, for instance—really cost more than he says they do, it's just too bad for you. He's always right. Everything is budgeted down to the last penny and you've got to make your money stretch. *The* man can break into your house anytime he wants to and poke into your things. You've got no right to protest. You've got no right to privacy when you go on welfare. Like I said. Welfare's a super-sexist marriage.¹

For Tillmon, "the man" was a metaphor for the welfare system and was her attempt to link the sexism that women experienced in the household directly by men with the sexism women on welfare encountered in institutionalized settings. In her analysis, welfare combined racial, class, and gender oppressions, laying the basis for an argument that it should be defined as a feminist issue.

Black welfare activists like Tillmon formulated a distinctive and broadly based analysis of women's liberation that spoke to the needs of many women who were not traditionally considered a part of the feminist movement. They put forth an insightful critique of the welfare system and the ways in which it controlled and regulated the sexuality and lives of women. The movement was comprised primarily of poor Black women on AFDC who organized protests and planned campaigns to demand higher welfare benefits, protection of their civil rights, and better treatment from their caseworkers. But it also drew support from other poor women of color and white women who came to see gender as central to the politics of welfare and who increasingly identified as feminists.

Even welfare rights activists who were more reluctant to identify as feminists nevertheless articulated economic demands that increasingly asserted a critique of gender roles, patriarchy, and proscribed sexuality. For example, these activists sought to bring dignity to their work as mothers and defy a culture that for the most part denied them the right to be mothers. They also challenged the belief that paid work was auto-

matically liberating and explored the exploitative conditions in the labor market under which most women, especially poor women of color, worked. Rather than prescribing that women either enter the workforce or stay home with children, choose to marry or reject marriage, welfare activists demanded that women have the power to define their own lives.

In developing their analysis, local welfare rights activists questioned not only the assumptions of white feminists but also those of Black men. They critiqued, for instance, Black nationalist efforts to strengthen male leadership in the family and community and their suggestions that African American women could contribute most to the race by having children. At a time when jobs for Black men came to be seen as the most effective solution to both Black poverty and the so-called crisis of the female-headed household, these Black welfare mothers asserted their right to an independent source of income and control over their own reproduction.

Most welfare recipients, even those who became activists, cannot be called intellectuals, in the traditional sense of the word.² Their analysis was forged not from a theoretical understanding of women's place but from a world view constructed out of their day-to-day lives. The material reality of their circumstances and the culture that surrounded them shaped a distinctive notion of gender politics and identity. These women thus became organic intellectuals, theorizing the interconnections among race, class, and gender on the basis of their daily experience. In the context of other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, they produced a counterhegemonic discourse that challenged the social position to which they, as poor women on welfare, were relegated.³

Welfare mothers are part of a long tradition of organizing among poor African American women.⁴ But, in many cases, these women did not put forth a coherent critique of patriarchy; indeed, they sometimes distanced themselves from an agenda that pushed explicitly for women's autonomy. Nevertheless, many experienced the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender. Fannie Lou Hamer offers one compelling example. Hamer's political involvement was rooted in the racism, poverty, and sexism she experienced in the Jim Crow South. Through her activism, she addressed the dual and interconnected problems of race and class. Hamer clearly saw herself involved in a struggle for racial liberation but believed it could only be won if Blacks also gained economic rights. Even though Hamer worked for the empowerment of poor African American women and men and frequently placed herself in positions of political leadership, she consciously distanced herself from feminists and a feminist agenda.⁵ In another case, African American women meatpackers involved in the United Packinghouse Workers of America between 1940 and 1960 challenged both racial and gender discrimination in the industry and the union. They developed a critique of sexist labor practices but did not identify as feminists.⁶ The

welfare rights movement added an explicitly feminist twist to this tradition of organizing, with poor Black women in local communities across the country becoming both theorists of and advocates for a new understanding of the relations among race, class, and gender.

The analyses of work, motherhood, family, and sexuality espoused by women welfare rights activists did not form a well-defined ideology at the movement's inception. It emerged haltingly and unevenly as welfare activists engaged in the struggle for improvements in public assistance. It was a product of women's day-to-day experiences with the welfare system, experiences replicated around the country. Welfare activists continually appealed to other women and women's groups and identified themselves simultaneously as mothers, welfare recipients, workers, sexual partners, political activists, and women. The Washington, D.C., Welfare Alliance, for example, wrote in 1968 to all the women's organizations in the area, including feminist organizations, inviting them to a meeting to discuss President Johnson's welfare proposals.⁷ In New York City, Coretta Scott King organized a similar gathering on behalf of the welfare rights movement, to discuss ways that women's groups could support the struggle.⁸ One of the most interesting attempts of welfare rights activists to appeal to women outside their ranks occurred in Michigan. There, they asked Lenore Romney, the governor's wife, "to intercede on their behalf and as a concerned mother" to oppose proposed cuts in AFDC.⁹ From the early 1960s to 1971, the threads of feminist consciousness that were evident among welfare rights activists at the local level spread across the country, affecting the development and dynamics of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and the priorities of the larger women's movement.

After 1972, the politics of welfare rights activists became more explicitly feminist; for instance, they advocated not just mothers' rights but women's rights and not just personal choice but reproductive rights. Moreover, rather than simply allying with women's organizations, by 1972, NWRO was calling itself a women's organization. This transformation from an implicit to an explicit feminist agenda was a product of the day-to-day struggles waged by women on welfare, the internal tension between women and men in the movement, and the larger political climate of the period in which feminism was becoming a more visible dominant force.

The conflict between women and men leaders within NWRO profoundly shaped the feminism of welfare rights activists. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, leaders struggled over who had control of the organization and the degree to which women's issues ought to take precedence. These conflicts led women to take over formal leadership of the organization by the end of 1972 and to put forth a more explicitly woman-centered agenda. Their struggle for economic security, then, was increasingly tied to their desire for autonomy as women. Overall, their struggle represented a unique brand of feminism, one that contributed to

and expanded the boundaries of the women's movement. This article traces the development of a feminist welfare rights movement and the role of poor Black women in its creation.¹⁰

The Emergence of Welfare Rights

The welfare rights movement began in the early and mid-1960s when hundreds of recipients of AFDC began to express dissatisfaction with the system of welfare. Disgruntled recipients initially came together in small neighborhood and community groups across the country. Although stirred partly by the political protests of the time, they organized primarily in response to local problems with welfare departments, such as a recipient unjustly removed from the welfare rolls, unable to buy basic necessities, or treated unfairly by caseworkers. Although stringent eligibility criteria and unfair practices were long associated with AFDC, in the late 1950s and early 1960s these policies became even harsher and more repressive. In response, using avenues opened up by the relatively liberal political climate, mothers receiving AFDC joined with friends and neighbors to share grievances, show one another support, and influence the policies and practices of the welfare department.

Many of the local groups founded in the early- and mid-1960s were headed by women. In Detroit, for example, a group of recipients calling themselves Westside Mothers ADC got involved in practical, problem-oriented campaigns. During its first year, the group met with postal authorities to get locks put on mailboxes in apartment buildings to prevent the theft of welfare checks, negotiated with the welfare department to pay for baby-sitters for mothers involved in the work experience program, requested special clothing allowances from the welfare department, and persuaded utility companies to eliminate deposits for low-income families.¹¹ The Englewood Welfare Rights Organization in New Jersey started when "many welfare recipients, through meeting and talking generally with one another, found that they were experiencing some of the [same] difficulties with the Bergen County Welfare Board." This included disrespect from caseworkers and a lack of communication between client and caseworker. When their complaints went unheeded, they began to recruit other recipients to join their newly formed group.¹²

Some individuals drawn to welfare rights activity had a long history of political organizing. Tillmon, a mother of six in Los Angeles who formed Aid to Needy Children Mothers Anonymous (ANC), worked in a laundry and was also a union shop steward. Tillmon joined the welfare rolls in 1963 because of illness but found the system so degrading that she decided to form a welfare rights group. She visited more than 500 recipients living in her housing project to get them involved in ANC.¹³ A tireless advocate of poor women, Tillmon was instrumental in founding NWRO and served on its executive board until 1972, when she became the first welfare recipient to be elected executive director of the organiza-

tion.¹⁴ Jeanette Washington had worked for many years as a community organizer on issues such as urban renewal and tenants rights, as well as in the Parent-Teacher Association, and the Stryckers Bay Community Organization before she became a prominent member of the (New York) Citywide Coordinating Committee of Welfare Rights Groups.¹⁵ Other welfare recipients traced their political activity to the civil rights movement. Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW) in Boston, a multiracial group not affiliated with the national organization, was formed after several mothers in the area attended the 1963 March on Washington. They formed MAW in 1965 with the help of members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Mildred Calvert, chair of the Northside Welfare Rights Organization in Milwaukee, explained that she began "seeing things in a different light" and became involved in the welfare rights movement after a local priest, Father James Groppi, led civil rights marches in the city.¹⁶ Sometimes these grassroots activists came together on their own; sometimes they got assistance from local churches, students groups, civil rights organizations, or Community Action Agencies, which were funded as part of the War on Poverty to encourage political participation by the poor.

These local groups eventually coalesced in 1967, with the help of middle-class organizers, to form the NWRO, the first national body to represent AFDC recipients. NWRO chapters and other unaffiliated welfare rights groups around the country were highly successful at winning concessions for poor women from state and local welfare departments. Recipients were granted additional allowances for household items, forced the creation of client advisory groups, and overturned some welfare regulations that were considered especially oppressive. On the national level, they won legal victories guaranteeing them the right to due process. The movement, funded largely by churches and foundations, reached its peak in 1968 with 30,000 members.

The welfare rights movement as a whole, including members, paid organizers, and staff, was diverse and included women and men, African Americans, other people of color, and whites. These diverse groups brought competing notions of liberation and empowerment into the movement. The elected leaders of NWRO were drawn from the ranks of the membership, which was limited to welfare recipients and later broadened to include any poor person. The National Coordinating Committee, which met four times a year, included delegates from each state. The nine-member Executive Committee, which met eight times a year, was elected at the annual conventions and charged with carrying out policies set by the membership. Although this structure was designed to ensure recipient participation, in reality most of the political power in NWRO rested with the paid field organizers and staff in the national office, most of whom were middle-class men, often white.¹⁷ The first executive director of NWRO was George Wiley, an African American

who grew up in a predominantly white, relatively privileged community in Rhode Island. A chemistry professor by training, Wiley was deeply committed to antiracist and antipoverty activism and in 1964 gave up a professorship at Syracuse University to work full-time with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In 1967 he was instrumental in the formation of NWRO. By 1970, questions of leadership and political direction of the movement would come to plague the organization, diminishing its political clout, but opening up opportunities for a more vocal Black feminist politics. Then in the mid-1970s internal tensions, severe financial difficulties, and a more hostile political climate, led the NWRO, like most welfare rights organizations, to fold.

The best estimates suggest that the membership of the movement was roughly 85 percent African American, 10 percent white, 5 percent Latina, with a small number of Native American participants as well. Although a handful of men became members, the organization was comprised almost exclusively of women—perhaps 98 percent.¹⁸ In addition to the differences of race/class/gender backgrounds of those involved in the welfare rights movement, political controversies were common between different chapters and even within local groups that were relatively homogeneous in terms of race and gender.¹⁹ Despite the difficulties of speaking of a single movement, certain generalizations about the interests of grassroots members can be made.

In its early years, welfare rights advocates articulated what in practice was a feminist agenda. Although local groups followed different chronological trajectories—some were founded in 1961 and others in 1968—many of the organizations and individuals were grappling with women's issues. Tillmon was perhaps the best-known NWRO feminist, but others, some of whom did not join NWRO, embraced similar politics. MAW members, for instance, firmly believed from the outset that women on welfare should control the welfare rights movement. The organization fought to maintain its autonomy as NWRO expanded and sent middle-class organizers to Massachusetts; in this case, MAW's ongoing struggles with the predominantly male NWRO staff bolstered its feminist analysis. These women and countless other grassroots activists developed a list of demands and grievances that laid the basis for a gendered critique of the welfare system as well as the formation of a Black feminist consciousness.

Welfare rights activists demanded the right to choose to be mothers or to enter the world of work outside the home; to date and have intimate relationships or to remain single; to have a child or not. They opposed welfare regulations that circumscribed their social lives and told them who they could or could not see. They opposed work requirements forcing women to accept employment when they preferred to stay at home. They opposed the arbitrary power of caseworkers and demanded the right to a fair hearing when caseworkers made decisions

they believed were unfair. They demanded higher welfare benefits or "special" grants for items they needed so they could properly take care of themselves and their children. They demanded the right to control their own reproduction, choosing for themselves when and how to take birth control, have an abortion, or be sterilized. And they demanded the right to control their own organizations.

Contesting Motherhood

One of the most important elements of the feminism advocated by early welfare rights advocates was support for women's role as mothers. Many white and Black feminists in the 1960s viewed motherhood as a source of oppression. One of the central goals advanced by radical white feminists such as Shulamith Firestone, was "the freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction."²⁰ Frances Beale, an important early voice of Black feminism and a founder and leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Black Women's Liberation Committee, initiated in 1966, had a similar view. She argued in her pathbreaking article, "Double Jeopardy," that "black women sitting at home reading bedtime stories to their children are just not going to make it." She believed that full-time mothers lead an "extremely sterile existence."²¹ Beale was responding in part to calls from Black nationalists who claimed Black women could best aid the struggle for racial liberation by having babies. She hoped to broaden the political and economic roles of Black women and Black mothers by making motherhood compatible with employment and/or political activity. Like Firestone, she wanted to open up rather than limit opportunities for women. In the process, however, their views implied to many that the work that mothers did was not by itself rewarding and ought to be replaced or supplemented with work outside the home. In the 1970s, some white feminists began to re-value women's reproductive capacities, arguing for its link to gender-specific qualities of nurturing and caregiving and, in some cases, for women's biological superiority.²² Unlike welfare rights activists, however, these cultural feminists generally saw men as the enemy. Nonetheless, they believed that the common experience of mothering could help build bridges between Black and white feminists.²³

In contrast to many other feminists in the 1960s, women in the welfare rights movement valued the work that mothers did. Their concerns for their children often spurred their involvement in the welfare rights struggle and their status as mothers was inseparable from their activism.²⁴ From the inception of the struggle, welfare rights activists referred to themselves as "mothers" or "mother-recipients" and sought to bring dignity and respect to their work as family caregivers.²⁵ In June 1966, 700 mothers in Pennsylvania formed a "crusade for children" and descended on Harrisburg to ask legislators for an immediate increase in the basic AFDC grant.²⁶ In 1968, reporter Gordon Brumm wrote that

"MAW's leaders hold that motherhood—whether the mother is married or not—is a role which should be fully supported, as fully rewarded, as fully honored, as any other."²⁷ Vera Walker, a welfare rights activist in Kansas and a thirty-year-old mother of five who grew up in a rural Mississippi shack, explained her involvement in welfare rights: "The white man told us what school to go to and when. If he said go to the fields, that is where we went. We worked behind the mule, plowed the white man's land, and made the white man rich. . . . Now I want to see to it that my children get better schooling and better clothes—everything that I didn't have a chance to get."²⁸ For Walker, the movement was fundamentally about creating a better life for her children.

More than simply exalting motherhood as meaningful and important work or acknowledging the centrality of their children in their lives, welfare recipients also demanded that their labor as mothers be recognized and compensated financially. Cassie B. Downer, chair of the Milwaukee County Welfare Rights Organization, explained, "A guaranteed adequate income will recognize work that is not now paid for by society. I think that the greatest thing that a woman can do is to raise her own children, and our society should recognize it as a job. A person should be paid an adequate income to do that."²⁹ A welfare rights group in Ohio argued in 1968 that "raising five kids is a full time job" and that they should have a choice of whether to work inside or outside the home.³⁰ The movement's slogan "welfare is a right" challenged the long-standing belief that AFDC should be given only to mothers who welfare officials determined were worthy. Instead, welfare rights activists suggested that all poor mothers deserved assistance. In the context of waning public support for AFDC, increasing political attacks on Black single mothers, and efforts to force women on welfare to enter the labor market, welfare activists asserted their right to public economic support.

This would best be achieved, they believed, with the implementation of a guaranteed annual income. For the women in the welfare rights movement, this guarantee was necessary as both an avenue to achieve women's economic independence and as compensation for their work as mothers. Unlike the call for self-determination put forth by some women's liberationists, the autonomy welfare recipients sought was more than an abstract demand. For poor women to have real autonomy, they had to have the financial support that allowed them to make the same choices that middle-class women were able to make. Welfare rights activists did not just look at the social pressures and norms governing women's lives but also at the financial constraints restricting women's choices. Endorsing the concept of a guaranteed annual income served several purposes at once. It forced the state to recognize housework and childcare as legitimate work, freed women from dependence on men, debunked the racial characterizations of Black women as lazy by acknowledging the work they did as mothers, and gave women a viable option to degrading labor market conditions.

Welfare recipients' insistence that motherhood was meaningful work resonated in important ways with the maternalist movement of the early twentieth century and with the "wages for housework" campaign of the 1960s and 1970s. Maternalists, who sought mothers' pensions for widows, had justified such assistance on grounds very similar to those of women in the welfare rights movement.³¹ But the earlier maternalist movement was qualitatively different from the later struggle of welfare recipients. Most maternalists were prosperous white women, moved by class and cultural bias to compel poor women to adopt middle-class standards of respectability.³² Their goal was to reinforce the socially defined role for women. Welfare rights activists, on the other hand, ultimately sought to give women autonomy to make choices for themselves. In addition, they recognized that as African American women they were not accorded the same social status or primary identity as mothers that white women had. To place value on their work as mothers was to challenge social norms, not conform to dominant expectations.

The wages for housework campaign, which involved both working-class and middle-class white women, more closely paralleled welfare recipients' demands for economic support for motherhood. In 1975, a London-based group claimed: "Our housework goes on behind the scenes, unnoticed, uncounted, uncharted as long as it is unpaid. But if we demand to be paid for it, if we demand Wages for Housework from the State, we are saying first of all that housework is work."³³ Much like the welfare rights movement, wages for housework advocates wanted the work that women did in the home to be recognized and rewarded. This movement, however, failed to grapple effectively with the often distinct domestic responsibilities of white women and women of color.

The value welfare rights activists placed on motherhood was a counterpoint to the experiences most African American women had with work and motherhood. Few Black women had the "luxury" of being full-time mothers, and most worked outside the home out of necessity. The majority of white women, even with rising employment rates following World War II, were able to avoid wage work during their peak child-bearing and childraising years. Wage work for poor women and most Black women often meant long hours, drudgery, and meager rewards, not a fulfilling career. As late as 1950, 60 percent of gainfully employed Black women worked in private households or as cleaning women and "help" in hotels, restaurants, and offices.³⁴ Given the opportunity, many poor African American women preferred to stay home. Thus, for Black women, the struggle to preserve their right to be mothers was viewed historically as a challenge to the subordination of African Americans.³⁵

Alternative Family Models

Welfare rights activists were also critical of the ways in which domestic relationships with men could be oppressive to women and especially to

mothers. In their exaltation of motherhood, they were not proposing that women on welfare simply marry and accept a subordinate status as mother and homemaker. They condemned the subordination of women in traditional family formations and suggested alternative models. Moreover, they defended their status as single mothers and disputed stereotypes vilifying them. Ultimately, they believed that women should have control over their sexuality and reproduction and autonomy in choosing their partners.

Women in the welfare rights movement responded to widespread attacks on Black single motherhood, views popularized by Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous 1965 report, *The Negro Family*. In it, Moynihan claimed Black women were domineering, Black men failed to provide for their families, and that the increase in single motherhood in the African American community created a social crisis.³⁶ Reaction to the Moynihan Report was immediate. Some civil rights activists believed his emphasis on Black family patterns detracted from more important structural issues such as job discrimination. Other Black activists challenged the characterization of the Black family as matriarchal. They argued that in most cases Black families conformed to the two-parent norm and that given a chance, Black men did provide adequately for their wives and children. Black feminists criticized Moynihan's use of the term "matriarch" for Black women who lacked both political and economic power. Moreover, they argued, Black female strength should be considered a virtue that fostered more egalitarian relations within the Black community.³⁷

Like other Black feminists, women in the welfare rights movement challenged the idea that strong Black women were dysfunctional. But they went one step further, questioning the primacy of the two-parent family model that Moynihan and most of his critics embraced. They attempted to debunk the notion that single motherhood was a sign of cultural deficiency and challenged the assumption that poor single mothers needed a male breadwinner. As single mothers who were essentially punished for not conforming to conventional norms, they were acutely aware of the social expectations to marry and establish traditional family relationships but believed that such relationships often served to subordinate women. Tillmon argued that if a woman was not married, people assumed she had "failed as a woman because [she has] failed to attract and keep a man. There's something wrong with [her]." The meager benefits and stigma attached to welfare served as an "example" to let any woman know what would happen "if she tries to go it alone without a man."³⁸ Brumm reported that MAW believed that marriage with its "fixed rules and obligations" was a "means for domination more than a means for expressing love."³⁹ These women argued that social pressures, the welfare system, and the institution of marriage all worked to discourage autonomy by forcing women into subordinate

relations with men. For them, liberation meant preserving their right to be women and mothers independent of men.

Welfare activists did not, however, reject men. Instead, they proposed alternative models for female-male relationships—where women maintained autonomy in their personal lives but strove for fulfilling relationships. "Instead [of institutional marriage]," Brumm explained that members of MAW "favor love, . . . responsibility toward other persons, and freedom to whatever extent that responsibility allows."⁴⁰ An important component of the eligibility criteria for AFDC was that mothers were not to date or be intimately involved with men. Welfare caseworkers believed such relationships would compromise the mother's moral standing or indicate that she no longer needed assistance because the man with whom she was involved could support her. Welfare rights activists asserted their right to date or develop relationships with men without negative repercussions from the welfare department.

Since the AFDC program's inception, caseworkers had conducted investigations to determine recipients' worthiness, sometimes showing up unexpectedly in infamous "midnight raids" to determine if clients were engaged in what they believed was unethical behavior. To counter this pattern of harassment, welfare recipients in Morgantown, West Virginia, wrote a handbook instructing others that "an AFDC mother can have male visitors as often as she wants and go out on dates if she leaves her children in the care of a responsible person." Later, they wrote that although the welfare department will not pay for a divorce, you can get a "pauper's divorce," suggesting women could separate from their husbands and plead ignorance about their whereabouts.⁴¹ When women did marry someone who was not the father of their children and therefore not obligated to provide support, they ideally wanted to continue to receive welfare and maintain their economic independence. Westside ADC Mothers of Detroit sought to overturn a policy which made the new husband financially liable for the children of the recipient.⁴² Through such strategies, welfare rights activists attempted to legitimate their status as single parents and assert their right to enter or reject the institution of marriage on their own terms. As Barbara Omolade argues, the survival of single mothers represented a challenge to the patriarchal ideal.⁴³ Welfare rights activists, by refuting the claim that single motherhood was pathological, similarly attempted to transform dominant notions of who and what comprised a functional family.

Reproductive rights were also an important concern for women on welfare, as they were for many women in this period. The introduction of the birth control pill, advances in other forms of contraception, and more liberal attitudes about sexuality led to greater sexual freedom during the 1960s. Yet within the Black Power movement, some people repeatedly called for Black women to refrain from using birth control and to do their "revolutionary duty," which was to have babies to perpetuate

the race. Birth control, in whatever form, these Black nationalists argued, was counterrevolutionary. Although this may be construed as an appreciation or valorization of Black mothers, it gave women little choice or autonomy. In response to their call to have babies, Black feminists asserted the benefits of reproductive choice, claimed their right to use birth control, and were adamant that their role in the revolution not be confined to procreation.⁴⁴

However antifeminist the position of some Black nationalists seemed, it was in part a response to the fact that poor women of color had struggled historically for the right to raise their own children. Under slavery, Black children were often unwillingly separated from their parents. At the turn of the century, campaigns were launched to limit the fertility of the "lower-races," and for many in the Black community, birth control remained identified with the eugenics movement.⁴⁵ For Black women on welfare the problem was compounded by a public outcry about welfare "abuse" that coupled "reform" with efforts to prevent poor women from bearing more children. In some cases, acceptance of welfare benefits was tied directly to sterilization, for instance. This made it necessary and logical for women on welfare to frame reproductive issues not in terms of access to abortion and birth control but choice, a term that would only come into vogue among middle-class white feminists in the mid-1970s. Welfare recipients wanted to choose for themselves whether or not they should have a child and under what circumstances. Tillmon wrote: "Nobody realizes more than poor women that all women should have the right to control their own reproduction."⁴⁶ In 1969, when United Movement for Progress (UMP), a predominantly Black anti-poverty coalition in Pittsburgh, refused federal funds for six Planned Parenthood clinics that served the poor community, women in the NWRO mobilized against community leaders. Speaking of William Haden, head of the UMP, mother Georgiana Henderson charged, "Who appointed him our leader anyhow? . . . He is only one person—and a man at that. He can't speak for the women of Homewood. . . . Why should I let one loudmouth tell me about having children?"⁴⁷ Through their organizing, the mothers had Haden removed as a representative on the antipoverty board and the funds restored to the clinics.

The struggle around the Planned Parenthood clinics in Pittsburgh indicates one way in which women on welfare struggled to keep birth control options open so they could assert their sexual and familial autonomy. Some manuals created by local welfare rights organizations to educate recipients informed them about birth control but stressed that "this is your choice."⁴⁸ In 1971 the NWRO national convention included a panel on abortion, but, as Tillmon explained, "We know how easily the lobby for birth control can be perverted into a weapon against poor women. The word is choice. Birth control is a right, not an obligation. A personal decision, not a condition of a welfare check."⁴⁹ The

political positions the welfare rights movement took around family and sexuality were an important departure from previous Black women's activism. As Deborah Gray White argues, prior to the 1960s, national leaders attempted to counter racist and sexist characterizations of Black women by portraying them as asexual beings.⁵⁰ Women welfare rights activists, on the other hand, vocally asserted their right to sexual freedom.

Work and Liberation

Women in the welfare rights movement also questioned feminist assertions that employment led to liberation. In the 1960s many middle-class white feminists fought for the right to work outside the home—not simply as a means of economic independence but also as a path to personal fulfillment. Welfare rights activists, many of whom worked out of necessity, believed that wage labor ought to be a matter of choice. They came to this conclusion because for them, as for most poor women, work was more often a source of oppression than a means of empowerment. Poor women found little that was rewarding or fulfilling in jobs that were physically taxing, unpleasant, and afforded them no autonomy or flexibility.

The different social expectations for Black and white, poor and middle-class women regarding employment were institutionalized when in 1967 welfare "reforms" required recipients to seek work. The Work Incentive Program (WIN) departed from the original premise of AFDC which insisted that mothers stay home and care for their children; it penalized welfare recipients who did not register for jobs or job training. Welfare rights activists challenged the artificial dichotomy between work and welfare and realized that welfare policies forcing mothers to work contradicted popular notions about their proper role as caretakers. They argued that the work ethic created a double standard; it applied only to men and to women on welfare. In a local Ohio newsletter, one welfare recipient cleverly contrasted her situation with the era's reigning symbol of womanhood: "Jackie Kennedy gets a government check. Is anyone making her go to work?"⁵¹ Tillmon wrote, "If you're a society lady from Scarsdale and you spend all your time sitting on your prosperity paring your nails, well, that's okay. Women aren't supposed to work."⁵² Women in the welfare rights movement thus analyzed and scrutinized the different expectations society had of white middle-class women and poor women of color. Their demands to be viewed more like their white counterparts illustrates the very different perceptions and realities of gender, domesticity, and motherhood across racial lines.

Welfare rights activists opposed forcing women into a labor market where they were unable to earn enough to support their families. Gender, they argued, was a powerful determinant in pay scales, and women's lower wages created an impossible predicament for single working mothers trying to raise a family. Tillmon pointed out that "a job doesn't necessarily mean an adequate income" and that "a woman with three

kids . . . earning the full Federal minimum wage of \$1.60 an hour, is still stuck in poverty."⁵³ Women in the welfare rights movement analyzed the ways in which the family wage system provided for married middle-class women but undercut the wages of their working-class counterparts. Members of MAW, for instance, according to Brumm, argued that working mothers "need nearly the same income as a family man, yet they are expected to take jobs ordinarily occupied by young unmarried women." Although there was a great deal of public disdain for women on welfare who were "supported out of public funds," they argued that women benefiting from the higher wages paid to men were also supported by public funds. They pointed out that the wives of highly paid men working for the state or in the private sector were supported through taxes or higher prices. MAW's position, as summarized by Brumm, was that "If our affluent society can support activities of no real value [such as building nuclear weapons], then it can equally well support the upbringing of children in a proper way."⁵⁴

Yet welfare rights activists also sought to ease the problems of women who, out of choice or necessity, entered wage work. In particular, they supported the creation of childcare centers. This was, in fact, "one of the first priorities" of Tillmon's welfare rights organization in California.⁵⁵ The NWRO office produced a guide for local welfare rights groups on how to organize a comprehensive community-controlled childcare program, giving them advice on raising money, hiring staff, and planning meals.⁵⁶ In 1972, the Clark County Welfare Rights Organization in Nevada successfully launched a daycare program with the help of local churches and a nutritionist employed by the Office of Economic Opportunity.⁵⁷ Although proponents of daycare centers, women in the welfare rights movement were, nevertheless, critical about the dynamic created when poor women were hired to care for other women's children. Afraid of the way institutionalized childcare could be used to oppress women, Tillmon warned that the fight for universal childcare should not be used to create "a reservoir of cheap female labor" that "institutionalized, partially self-employed Mammies."⁵⁸ The image of the Mammy was a powerful one for African American women. Since slavery, they had been forced to leave their own children and care for other people's children. Thus, although daycare centers could potentially free some women from the constraints of childcare, it could just as likely create an exploitative situation for other women.

Because Black and white women, in this case welfare moms and white middle-class moms, had different experiences, they came to different conclusions about the necessity of paid employment, the scope of sexual and reproductive freedom they desired, and the value placed on motherhood. For poor Black women, paid employment was not necessarily a challenge to sexual inequality. On the contrary, encouraging women to enter the world of work would only reinforce the kind of ex-

ploitation and oppression that many of them faced on a daily basis. Instead, they proposed that women have the option of staying home by providing adequate public support. This, in itself, was a radical challenge to the socially defined gender roles of poor Black women, who had never been seen primarily as homemakers or mothers. Although some may argue that the welfare rights movement did not pose a challenge to the conventional wisdom that "women's place is in the home," it did question the popular belief that "Black women's place is in the workforce."

Autonomy within NWRO

By the early 1970s, the distinctive feminist analysis that had been gradually formulated at the grassroots level became a more defined element within NWRO, leading to clashes with the national staff, who were predominantly male and mostly white. When welfare recipients put forth their own analysis of work, motherhood, and sexuality, they were continually confronted with the opposing views of male leaders. As women in the organization became increasingly aware of the sexist and condescending attitudes of some staff members, they responded by asserting their autonomy and insisting on recipient control of the organization. This struggle for power within the welfare rights movement helped women define and assert their feminist outlook even more clearly.

One of the fundamental issues that divided staff and recipients was how the two groups defined the movement. For the staff, NWRO was a movement of poor people with the primary goal of eradicating economic injustice. It was a struggle about power, making demands on the state, and staging mass protests and demonstrations against welfare abuse. Staff members had one goal—to win greater benefits for welfare recipients. For recipient leaders, especially Black women, the issues of power and economic justice were significant; but their struggle was also about racist and sexist ideology, the meaning of welfare, and self-determination. The meager monthly checks, the persistent efforts to force recipients to work outside the home, the poor treatment they received from caseworkers, and the stigma associated with their assistance could not be separated from what society expected of them and how society demeaned them as Black women.

The struggle over the WIN Program exemplified this difference. The women opposed the basic premise of WIN because it required mothers to work. They argued: "This means that a mother with school-age children will be forced (if they do not volunteer) to accept the same old inferior training or jobs that have always been left for poor people."⁵⁹ The desire of welfare mothers to have a choice whether to work at home raising their children or to take paid employment outside the home was not always respected by the predominantly male staff of NWRO. Indeed in late 1968, middle-class staff members reversed the organization's

earlier stand opposing WIN and accepted a \$434,000 contract with the Department of Labor to educate and train participants in the program. This deal was bitterly opposed by women involved in the movement, especially those at the grassroots level. The Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization, led by Roxanne Jones and Alice Jackson, denounced the national leadership for supporting, and helping to implement "the most reactionary program in decades."⁶⁰ Challenging society's assumptions about poor mothers, putting forth a morally defensible position, and protecting their dignity and worth as mothers were more important to these women than the infusion of cash to build up the national organization.

In accepting the Department of Labor contract, staff members were thinking very practically, hoping to use government funds to organize recipients and transform the welfare system. They believed the money would strengthen NWRO immensely, enable it to build its membership, and put it in a stronger position to lobby for its long-term goal of a guaranteed income. Most women welfare rights activists were not opposed to strategies that would build up the organization, but they saw the problem of welfare as ideological as well as practical. Other NWRO campaigns, to extract resources from the welfare department or get credit cards from department stores, served the dual purpose of strengthening the organization and furthering the goal of achieving dignity.⁶¹ Even if the Department of Labor contract might have practical benefits, it worked against the women's ideological goals. It was accepting this assumption—that poor Black women ought to work—that grassroots activists viewed as a major source of repressive welfare policies. To concede that ground would, in the long run, work against their interests.

NWRO was theoretically structured to ensure control by welfare recipients, but in practice, staff members—who took charge of fund-raising, coordinating welfare rights groups, managing the budget, planning programs, and devising strategy—wielded power in the organization. Unlike recipients, staff members could make welfare work a full-time job and be available on a day-to-day basis. These middle-class men, were, in effect, the leaders. An internal report documented the problem in 1972:

Attitudes of sexism on every level affect the way that programs are implemented. Major decision-making comes out of the national office which is controlled by men. Because of this, membership at local, state and regional levels do not have the opportunity to participate in any meaningful way in their organization, and every time they attempt to participate they are ignored or regarded as emotional women. The problem then becomes not "how do we have an effective program guided by the membership," but "what do we do about the ladies". . . . Further, the program areas cannot be implemented properly as long as there is such wide range sexism.⁶²

Bill Pastreich, a white male organizer of the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization, exemplified the attitude some men had of their own importance and of women's limited significance. In a 1969 letter to

the national office, Pastreich trivialized the needs and problems of the mothers in his area. He suggested that the national office should guarantee organizers both a car and insurance, whereas national officers (who were welfare recipients) "should be people who can take care of their own babysitting problems and they should look to neither their local WRO or [the] National [office] for babysitting money." Speaking to a student group in the same year, Pastreich said, "I would discourage their picking a lady [as an organizer], because she doesn't have the time to put in the hours on that kind of stuff. I also think that women in general are bad leaders. They have to take a week off to have emotions."⁶³ White male organizers in Boston maintained rigid control over meetings, demonstrations, and other activities and, on occasion, told recipient leaders what to say in meetings.⁶⁴

These subtle and not-so-subtle instances of racism and sexism helped raise the consciousness of welfare rights activists. Paralleling the experiences of some women in SDS, SNCC, and the Black Panther Party, who experienced sexism while fighting alongside male allies, women in the welfare rights movement began to question their marginalization within the organization.⁶⁵ These internal tensions helped nurture the sentiment among welfare recipients that NWRO should be a Black women's organization.

Tillmon was one of those asserting women's right to control NWRO and determine its political direction. As Guida West recounts, Tillmon proposed that the nonpoor serve only in supportive roles and advocated a strategy in which women on welfare organize "to try and do something for ourselves and by ourselves to the extent that we could."⁶⁶ Central to Tillmon's vision was that women, in addition to challenging the welfare bureaucracy, should develop autonomy and self-sufficiency. The issue of empowerment informed both who would have control within the organization and what would be the strategies and goals of the movement. For recipient leaders, the methods of organizing and the process of empowering one of the most oppressed sectors of society was as important as demanding that the state provide adequate assistance for the poor. In Boston, the independent MAW was critical of NWRO and its state affiliate, the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization, because they believed that the organizers were using the mothers for their own ends. They wanted, instead, "to reconstruct, reorient, and have welfare mothers themselves implement, the welfare system."⁶⁷

The issue that in early 1970 led to a permanent division between NWRO staff and recipients and the resignation of many staff members was how to revive the floundering organization. Internal conflict intensified as membership rolls shrank, donations slowed to a trickle, and the political climate became increasingly hostile. The male staff, under George Wiley's leadership, sought to broaden the movement to include the working poor and unemployed fathers. Wiley believed that the racist

and sexist attacks on the movement could be neutralized if the constituency was enlarged, and Black women were no longer the most visible actors. Many recipient leaders opposed to this change because they believed the political focus on the needs of women and children would be diluted. As a result of these irresolvable differences, women leaders became convinced of the need for an organization run by and for welfare recipients, meaning mainly poor Black women. Wiley resigned from NWRO in 1972 and began another organization called the Movement for Economic Justice which included the working poor. Tillmon succeeded him as executive director of NWRO and after that point, the organization was in the hands of the female recipients.

Within any organization that is cross-race, cross-class, and cross-gender, the issues of racism, sexism, and classism affect relations both between the organization and society and within the organization itself. The welfare rights movement was not sheltered from the politics of the dominant culture, and there was a constant battle over goals, aspirations, and organizational style. Whatever good intentions motivated the national staff, they ended up replicating the very power relations they sought to eradicate. The popular perception of welfare recipients as unworthy and undeserving was only reinforced when the key organization formed to represent them continued to marginalize recipients and belittle their ideas and input. Thus, Black women on welfare had to wage a struggle not only against dominant political institutions and cultural forces but their radical allies as well. This process of seeking empowerment within their organization, in addition to their battles with the state and the labor market, helped crystallize welfare recipients' feminist outlook.

Welfare Is a Women's Issue

By the early 1970s, the ideas that had germinated among welfare rights activists on the local level became part of an analysis that reflected NWRO's place in the larger women's movement. Because of their earlier conflicts with male allies and the growing visibility of women's liberation, women in the welfare rights movement more directly and with greater frequency spoke of themselves as a part of the feminist movement. Some believed that they were "the front line troops of women's freedom" and that the critical issue of women's, and mothers', right to a living wage was of concern to all women.⁶⁸ Even those who did not explicitly characterize their organization as feminist, clearly saw the empowerment of women on welfare as their ultimate goal. Rather than eclipsing the struggle for economic justice, the identity of NWRO as a women's group was firmly rooted in members' desire to mitigate the effects of poverty. Far from being contradictory, the diverse goals of the movement reinforced its strength and supported a universalist agenda.

Upon assuming control of NWRO, recipient leaders immediately issued a "Women's Agenda" which defined poverty and welfare as wom-

en's issues. The official shift in focus was signaled by changes in procedures as well as priorities. Members, for example, began to refer to the convention chair as chairwoman rather than chairman.⁶⁹ At the national convention in 1974, the organization offered a panel on feminist politics at which Margaret Sloan of the newly organized National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) spoke. Women in the welfare rights movement also endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment; and at one point, welfare leaders on the Executive Committee considered changing the name of the organization to the National Women's Rights Organization.⁷⁰ The organizers believed that in order to succeed, all women must unite. Jeanette Washington, longtime community activist who served on the Executive Board of the Citywide Coordinating Committee of Welfare Rights Groups in New York, said it most succinctly:

We women must stay together on this issue and not let anyone divide us. We can do this first by challenging the male power-holding groups of this nation. We must make them remember that we, as mothers and as women, are concerned about the survival of our children, of all human life. We women have to organize, agitate, pressure and demand; not beg. You see, in the past, women have always been told that they should stay behind their men and be nice and cool and don't rock the boat. Well, I just don't want to rock one boat, I want to rock all boats—the big boats. And I want all women to help me.⁷¹

Perhaps most indicative of the change in the organization at the national level was a pamphlet issued by the national office entitled "Six Myths about Welfare." The pamphlet wove together an analysis of poverty, welfare, and motherhood from threads that had emerged earlier among grassroots constituencies. Now the NWRO articulated a full-fledged feminist vision of welfare:

Whether or not one accepts the notion that child-raising should be "woman's work," the fact is that in most American families childraising is woman's work—and hard work, at that. If a woman's husband dies or leaves home, does childraising suddenly cease to be "work"? In effect, that's what the welfare department is saying when it defines "work" solely as a job outside the home. The reality, of course, is that a woman who becomes the head of a household is doing more work, being both the father and the mother of her children. It's at least paradoxical, perhaps cruel, that a society which traditionally extols the virtues of motherhood is simultaneously forcing some mothers to leave their homes and children for low-wage, dead-end, outside jobs.⁷²

After women officially took control of NWRO, political activity around reproductive choice expanded as well. The organization took more proactive measures in regard to the forced sterilization of African American, Native American, and Puerto Rican women. Coerced sterilizations had been practiced on poor, nonwhite, and "feeble-minded" women throughout the twentieth century.⁷³ Welfare recipients, in particular, were sometimes forcibly sterilized under the threat of losing their welfare payments.⁷⁴ In the mid-1970s, the sterilization rate for

women on public assistance with three children was 67 percent higher than for women with the same number of children but not on public assistance.⁷⁵ Thus, sexual freedom for welfare recipients was defined not only by access to birth control and abortion but also by complete control over one's reproduction, including the right to oppose sterilization and bear healthy children. In 1973 Tillmon, as executive director, issued a statement jointly with Charles Fanueff, executive director of the Association for Voluntary Sterilization, opposing forced sterilization of welfare recipients.⁷⁶

NWRO's position on reproductive rights was consistent with that of many Black women at the time, including the NBFO, but it preceded mass movements of white and Black women around this issue. As early as 1969, the Citywide Welfare Alliance in Washington, D.C., challenged restrictive eligibility procedures for free abortions at the city's only public hospital. They argued that a rigorous policy for deciding who was eligible for an abortion disadvantaged low-income women, because these women would most likely resort to an illegal abortion or attempt to self-induce, putting themselves in grave danger. After picketing and filing a lawsuit, welfare activists were appointed to a committee to review the hospital's abortion policy.⁷⁷ For these activists, access to abortion meant not just demanding its legality but assuring that public funding be available to poor women who otherwise would not be able to afford the service. The concerns of welfare recipients with reproductive rights soon developed into a more widespread political movement. In the mid- and late-1970s several local organizations to end sterilization abuse and protect women's right to abortion were formed, including the Committee for Abortion Rights and against Sterilization Abuse, an interracial group in New York City. In 1981 a group of mostly white socialist feminists formed the Reproductive Rights National Network, which embodied NWRO's goals for both abortion rights and prevention of sterilization abuse.

In the early 1970s mainstream white women's organizations also began to take a greater interest in poverty and welfare. As early as 1970, NOW passed a resolution expressing support for NWRO and recognizing the importance of poverty as a woman's issue: "The poor in the United States are predominantly women. . . . NOW must, therefore, work particularly hard to free our sisters in poverty from the intolerable burdens which have been placed on them. The system must work for the most oppressed if it is to succeed. The National Organization for Women, therefore, proposes to establish at the national level immediate and continuing liaison with the National Welfare Rights Organization and similar groups and urges each chapter to do the same at the local level."⁷⁸ The following year, NOW endorsed NWRO's goal of a guaranteed income, which Merrilee Dolan, chair of NOW Task Force for Women in Poverty, said, "is *the* most important women's issue for which we should be fighting."⁷⁹ Similarly, the National Women's Politi-

cal Caucus (NWPC) supported NWRO's proposal for a guaranteed annual income and formed a Welfare Reform Task Force.⁸⁰

The actions by NOW and other organizations were important symbolically and demonstrate the impact the welfare rights movement had on the priorities of more mainstream feminist groups. Martha Davis suggests that it was NOW's relationship with NWRO that encouraged feminists to recognize that poverty was "inextricably linked to common barriers faced by women in society, such as violence, wage discrimination, and disproportionate family responsibilities" and that poor women needed "social supports to redress these burdens."⁸¹ By the early 1970s welfare had become clearly identified as a women's issue. Both NOW and the NWPC built on the activities and analyses offered first by welfare rights activists.

This success, however, was both temporary and superficial. Although NOW officially expressed support for NWRO, little came of the relationship. Once the welfare rights movement folded in 1975, mainstream women's organizations took little action on behalf of women on welfare. Interaction between welfare rights organizations and middle-class white women's organizations was limited largely because of their divergent views about work, family, and independence. Both the ideological orientation and political platform of NOW and other liberal feminist organizations continued to marginalize the concerns of poor women and women of color. Martha Davis argues that the efforts within NOW to address poverty originated mainly with the leadership and that the middle-class membership remained "fixed on formal, legal equality for those already in the workplace as the proper instrument for addressing women's poverty."⁸² This was not a strategy that women on welfare, who were fighting for the right to stay home and care for their children, would find useful or appealing. Although a common interest in empowering women brought NWRO and NOW together in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the boundaries of class and race continued to inhibit a long-term alliance as Black welfare activists and white middle-class NOW members developed different strategies to address their own particular experiences of sexism.

As the welfare rights movement waned, the concerns of welfare recipients seemed to be more adequately addressed by emerging socialist feminist groups than by NOW. Socialist feminists made poverty a central component of their analysis of women's oppression. They addressed reproductive rights, women's unequal wages in the workplace, as well as the way in which women's labor in the home contributed to the reproduction of the labor force and thus helped sustain capitalism. In the mid-1970s, socialist feminists led the wages for housework campaign, which demanded pay for the work that women did in the household. The movement saw itself as a product of both the welfare rights and the women's liberation movements. In England, wages for housework advo-

cates suggested that "welfare mothers . . . not only spoke to the needs of all women but were in fact a public crescendo to the massive *rebellion of women* that had been going on behind closed doors."⁸³ A more direct connection between welfare rights and socialist feminism was evident in 1974, when a group of self-proclaimed socialist feminists renewed welfare activism in New York City by forming the Downtown Welfare Advocate Center.⁸⁴ By combining an analysis of class and gender, socialist feminists more effectively reached out to working-class women and tackled issues of poverty and reproductive rights that were so central to the welfare rights movement. However, these groups were, for the most part, predominantly white and did not see race and racism as a core concern. Consequently, they, too, were unable to cross the racial divide.

Although a successful long-term relationship between NWRO and NOW never developed and most socialist feminist initiatives were short lived, the attempts at cooperation reveal the possibilities for alliances across race and class among women. Poor Black women on welfare were positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and this may have inspired their efforts to recruit white and middle-class women as allies. Similarly, they could work with men committed in a practical way to the eradication of poverty—so long as this did not impede the goal of women's autonomy. And they identified with and reached out to the ongoing movement for Black liberation—so long as this did not subsume their concerns as women. They had simultaneous goals of personal autonomy, community empowerment, ideological transformation, and practical change. Their institutional powerlessness encouraged them to make alliances with and appeals to others who might respond to their issues. Indeed, from their vantage point, such alliances were necessary if a successful struggle was to be waged. But at the same time, they took care to ensure that their integrity and political vision were not compromised.

Conclusion

Poor Black women are positioned at the nexus of race, class, and gender oppression.⁸⁵ These women often understood the importance of gender in shaping their lives, but they also realized that all women were not treated in the same way. They believed that how they were treated was determined not just by their sex but by their race and class as well. For poor Black women to decide if racism or sexism or poverty was more important in their lives was both impossible and nonsensical. They could not understand the meaning of gender without class, or poverty without racism. This reality enabled activists in the welfare rights movement to understand not just how these oppressions coexist, but, for example, how the meaning of class is transformed by and lived through racism and sexism.

Through their struggle to reform the welfare system, poor women formulated a vision of Black feminism, or what Maxine Baca Zinn and

Bonnie Thornton Dill have recently called multiracial feminism, which integrated race, class, and gender.⁸⁶ They incorporated aspects of class empowerment, racial liberation, gender equity, and sexual autonomy. Consequently, they were able to organize around welfare rights and understand this work as partly about women's liberation. Their example provides us with a broader definition of women's rights and suggests that the struggle for welfare rights should be considered part of the feminist movement.

Like many other feminists of the 1960s, these women ultimately wanted autonomy, although what that meant for them in concrete terms was quite different from what it meant to women of other class and racial backgrounds. For them, this goal was coupled with both ideological and practical demands. They fought for an increase in welfare benefits or a guaranteed annual income which would provide the means to make choices about parenthood, employment, and sexuality otherwise closed to them. They believed that economic assistance was not a form of dependency but a source of liberation. They also constructed a political platform that challenged the racist and sexist stereotypes associated with Black single motherhood. The movement, then, was as much a women's movement as a poor people's movement, as much about feminism as Black liberation.

The welfare rights movement, like other Black women's political struggles, has been rendered invisible in most accounts of feminism in the 1960s. Few mainstream narratives of women's history and feminism even mention women on welfare. But researchers are increasingly turning to the welfare rights movement to better understand women's politics. Annelise Orleck and Anne Valk have examined the role of motherhood as a justification of and motivation for Black women's political involvement in the movement. Felicia Kornbluh has suggested that the movement can help expand our notion of rights beyond a work-centered conceptualization and toward recognition of the rights of consumers. Some historians of the welfare rights movement, in particular Guida West, Jacqueline Pope, and Susan Handley Hertz, have produced pathbreaking work that analyzes the gender politics of the movement.⁸⁷ They assert that welfare rights was a social protest of poor women, not simply poor people. But the analysis needs to be taken one step further. It is not enough to suggest that women in the welfare rights movement identified as consumers, mothers, or addressed issues of concern to women and feminists. In addition, we need to examine whether women in the welfare rights movement—on their own terms—considered themselves feminists and what particular kind of feminism they espoused.

The history of welfare rights has often been told from the perspective of the middle-class leaders or the national office, where middle-class (mostly male) organizers tended to dominate.⁸⁸ In a much-needed and insightful book on Black women's organizations, Deborah Gray White

argues that within the welfare rights movement, class was prioritized over race and gender.⁸⁹ For the middle-class staff, who initially directed the organization, it was. But this was not so for much of the membership. In an article on welfare rights and women's rights, Martha Davis argues that because of differences of race and class, an attempted alliance between NWRO and NOW was unsuccessful. As a result, she concludes, "federal and state welfare policies during that period were seldom challenged on feminist grounds," a view that fails to take into account the politics of local welfare rights activists.⁹⁰ In this article, I have focused less on national developments and legislative struggles and instead have analyzed the sentiments of the rank-and-file membership, most of them poor Black welfare recipients. A reading of the welfare rights movement from the standpoint of these welfare mothers gives us a different view of the movement both institutionally and intellectually.

Understanding the welfare rights movement as a part of the struggle for women's liberation in the 1960s forces us to rethink our definition of what constitutes "women's issues." If, as White argues, NWRO, along with the National Black Feminist Organization, was important politically because it put Black women "back at the center of race progress,"⁹¹ then I would argue that NWRO was also significant because it brought a race and class analysis to gender issues. As a movement dedicated to women's liberation, in fact if not in word, the struggle for welfare rights leaves little doubt as to how the map of feminism in the 1960s should be redrawn. Welfare advocates attempted to define welfare and poverty as women's issues. This gave them a springboard to explore in a more sophisticated way issues of race and class in relation to gender. The Black women in the welfare rights movement were not plagued by the same dilemmas that many middle-class white feminists struggled with: Do we work within the system or outside of it? Do we form a movement of women dedicated to issues of importance only to women; or can we work in organizations that address problems such as poverty, racism, and militarism? As Patricia Hill Collins notes, Black feminists often rejected the oppositional, dichotomized model of organizing.⁹² These Black women could simultaneously work on issues of race, class, and gender. They were working for their own benefit and to improve their community. They worked both to make the system work for them as well as to challenge it.

Women in the welfare rights movement opposed essentialized notions of race and gender and formed alliances with Black and white men and white women. Through their organizing efforts they learned that not all women (Black or white) would be their allies and not all African Americans (women or men) would support their political positions. They rejected encompassing appeals to women or African Americans that did not take into account the general problem of poverty or their particular problems as welfare recipients, yet they were able to form

viable, if short-lived, political alliances. Rather than compromising their integrity, the alliances helped strengthen their identity as radicals, Black liberationists, and feminists. Their "multiple consciousness" encouraged them to become advocates of feminism, proponents of a guaranteed annual income, and combatants in the struggle for Black liberation—all at the same time.

Women in the welfare rights movement were certainly not the first Black women to address the issues of race, class, and gender. But the welfare rights movement was one of the most important organizational expressions of the needs and demands of poor Black women. Predating the outpouring of Black feminist literature in the 1970s, women in the welfare rights movement challenged some of the basic assumptions offered by other feminists—white and Black—and articulated their own version of Black feminism. The problem of economic survival and day-to-day experiences with poverty separated them from some other Black feminists.⁹³ Black women in the welfare rights movement never sought solutions in self-improvement, racial uplift, or individual assistance. They rejected traditional notions of female respectability—and all of its class trappings—as a condition for their political demands. Rather, they called for a national safety net and demanded that such assistance be a right. Relying on the Black community, although historically important, was still charity; self-empowerment and the guarantee of rights assured long-term solutions.

The process of trying to understand and take seriously the ideas put forth by welfare recipients is part of a long tradition among Black feminists to look to "African-American women not commonly certified as intellectuals by academic institutions [who have nevertheless] functioned as intellectuals." Through their experiences, these poor Black women, welfare recipients, mothers, and activists formulated an analysis that reflected a particular feminist orientation. By interpreting their experiences and "clarifying the Black women's standpoint," women in the welfare rights movement contributed in an important way to the development of Black feminist thought and feminist thought more generally.⁹⁴ Women in the welfare rights movement demanded "bread, justice, and dignity." Although bread and justice were important, they were not enough. Recipients also demanded dignity—that they have control over their own lives, have the means to choose their careers, and the opportunity to shape their own organizations—essentially, that they be empowered. To challenge their position in society effectively, they had to confront racism, sexism, and class oppression. And it was through this effort that they succeeded in creating a movement that was as much a feminist movement as a movement for racial equality and economic justice.

NOTES

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1. Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare Is a Women's Issue," *Ms.* 1 (spring 1972): 111.
2. Jorge Castaneda argues that in polarized societies such as Latin America where civic institutions are weak, the figure of "an intellectual" can take the form of a "writer, priest, journalist, academic, artist, activist." See his *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 20-21. For a similar approach to Black women building theory from everyday life, see Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs* 14 (spring 1989): 610-33.
3. For the role of experience in producing counterhegemonic discourse, see Shari Stone-Mediatore, "Chandra Mohanty and the Revaluing of Experience," *Hypatia* 13 (spring 1998): 116-33; and Paula Stewart Brush, "The Influence of Social Movements on Articulations of Race and Gender in Black Women's Autobiographies," *Gender and Society* 13 (February 1999): 120-37.
4. See, for example, Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In-Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1994); Donna L. Van Raaphorst, *Union Maids Not Wanted: Organizing Domestic Workers, 1870-1940* (New York: Praeger, 1988); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).
5. Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); and Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Dutton, 1993), chap. 15.
6. Bruce Fehn, "African American Women and the Struggle for Equality in the Meat-packing Industry, 1940-1960," *Journal of Women's History* 10 (spring 1998): 45-69.
7. Etta Horn, of the Washington, D.C., Welfare Alliance, "Letter to D.C. Women's Groups," 23 Feb. 1968, box 24, George Wiley Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.
8. Coretta Scott King, "Special Message to Mrs. Beulah Sanders and Leaders of Women's Organizations in the New York Area," 23 July 1968, box 24, Wiley Papers.
9. Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, press release, prior to 17 Mar. 1968, box 25, Wiley Papers.
10. The welfare rights movement was a multiracial movement that included other women of color and white women. In some cases, the women described may have been Latina, Native American, white, or their racial background may not have been evident to the writer. Nevertheless, the vast majority of women in the movement were African American.
11. Westside Mothers (ADC), "The Challenge," *Newsletter*, 21 Jan. 1968, box 25, Wiley Papers.
12. Englewood Welfare Rights Organization, Report, 16 Aug. 1968, box 25, Wiley Papers.
13. Hobart Burch, "Insights of a Welfare Mother: A Conversation with Johnnie Till-

- mon," *The Journal* 14 (January-February 1971): 13-23; and Robert McG. Thomas Jr., "Johnnie Tillmon Blackston, Welfare Reformer, Dies at 69," *New York Times*, 21 Nov. 1995.
14. The executive director was elected by the Executive Committee.
 15. Jeanette Washington, interview by Guida West, New York, 25 Sept. 1981.
 16. Milwaukee County Welfare Rights Organization, *Welfare Mothers Speak Out: We Ain't Gonna Shuffle Anymore* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 25-26.
 17. For an extended discussion, see Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 57-64. West states that most staff were college-educated white men but included some Black men and white women. There was also, occasionally, a Black woman on staff. The staff was hired and fired by the executive director.
 18. David Street, George T. Martin Jr., and Laura Kramer Gordon, *The Welfare Industry: Functionaries and Recipients of Public Aid* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1979), 124; cited in West, 45-46.
 19. On local chapters see Lawrence Neil Bailis, *Bread or Justice: Grassroots Organizing in the Welfare Rights Movement* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1972); Susan Handley Hertz, *The Welfare Mothers Movement: A Decade of Change for Poor Women* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1981); Larry Jackson and William Johnson, *Protest by the Poor: The Welfare Rights Movement in New York City* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1984); and Jacqueline Pope, *Biting the Hand That Feeds Them* (New York: Praeger, 1989).
 20. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow, 1970), 193.
 21. Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 146-55.
 22. For an extended discussion of cultural feminism, see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), chap. 6.
 23. Lauri Umansky, "The Sisters Reply: Black Nationalist Pronatalism, Black Feminism, and the Quest for a Multiracial Women's Movement, 1965-1974," *Critical Matrix* 8, no. 2 (1994): 19-50.
 24. For an excellent overview of the connection between mothering and activism, see *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right*, ed. Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1997).
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 28. Vera Walker, quoted in Bob Agard, "Welfare Rights Group Seeks Charge Accounts," newspaper article (newspaper unknown), 6 Dec. 1968, box 25, Wiley Papers.
 29. Cassie B. Downer, quoted in *Welfare Mothers Speak Out*, 135-36.
 30. "Ohio Adequate Welfare News," *Ohio Steering Committee for Adequate Welfare Newsletter*, 18 Apr. 1968, box 1, Whitaker Papers.
 31. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
 32. Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled*; and Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).
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work, and the Wages Due (London: Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975), 7.

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35. Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 166-68; Jones, chap. 2; Eileen Boris, "The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the 'Political,'" in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), 213-45; and M. Rivka Polatnick, "Diversity in Women's Liberation Ideology: How a Black and a White Group of the 1960s Viewed Motherhood," *Signs* 21 (spring 1996): 679-706.

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