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TANF, or “Torture and Abuse of Needy Families” Top Ten Misconceptions About TANF*

Barbara Ehrenreich

Here, in no particular order, is my attempt to summarize the top ten misconceptions about TANF, “Temporary Assistance for Needy Families,” or as it is called by some people who have been affected by it, “Torture and Abuse of Needy Families.”

1. FAMILIES HEADED BY WOMEN ARE NOT ‘REAL’ FAMILIES

A major assumption behind welfare reform has been that families headed by women are not ‘real’ families. Instead, they are seen as a sort of social problem or as defective. This assumption appears to be behind the President’s proposal as he tries to find some way to get poor women married. The idea that marriage is a solution to poverty for women actually goes back to the mid-nineties. Maybe this would not be such a bad idea if we had a lot of CEOs who were willing to marry women in poverty. But most women, of course, are going to marry men who are in somewhat similar economic circumstances as themselves. Poor women are likely to marry poor men or relatively low-income men.

The emphasis has been on women, but male wages really took a dive in the last fifteen or twenty years. Looking at this problem, I once tried to calculate how *many* men a woman has to marry to lift her out of poverty, and the answer came out to be greater than two! If we could just abolish the law against marrying just one man, then marriage might solve the problem.

* Remarks from a speech given on March 1, 2002, at the Building Alliance to End Poverty Conference organized by Washington’s Working Families Campaign: 2002.

2. POVERTY IS CAUSED BY “PROMISCUITY”

There is an assumption behind TANF and welfare reform that there is poverty in this country because of “promiscuity;” that low-income women are promiscuous and have “illegitimate” children. “Illegitimacy” — I hate that word. *All* children are legitimate. They deserve our love. They deserve our support.

Promiscuity was the concern of the Republican right in 1996 and the years leading up to welfare reform. Money is being spent every year on abstinence education for low-income women. Flash back for a moment to 1996, and picture Bill Clinton signing a law aimed at preventing promiscuity and budgeting money for abstinence education. It is such a shame that that money had to be wasted on poor women.

3. WELFARE CAUSES POVERTY

A third misconception is the assumption that welfare causes poverty. The idea was that if people are given government money, they will become demoralized, dependent, parasitical degenerates. Welfare no more causes poverty than Social Security causes baldness. I have studied this matter for a long time, and come up with a new theory that I would like known: poverty may actually be caused by a lack of money! That is something to look into, and that is a social problem you can throw money at.

4. SINGLE MOTHERS ARE NOT WORKING UNLESS THEY HAVE A PAID JOB

The assumption is that single mothers are not working unless they have a paid job. Whoever came up with this notion clearly has never spent a rainy day inside with a couple of toddlers. I refer you to the old feminist slogan, “Every mother is a working mother.” I would add that women raising children in poverty are working harder. It’s more work making ends meet, putting things together, raising children in difficult neighborhoods, having to go through the bureaucracy to get medical care and so on. Now that is a job.

5. PEOPLE WHO DO NOT HAVE PAID EMPLOYMENT ARE LAZY, DEGENERATE PARASITES

Another assumption that is implicit in welfare reform and keeps coming up in the rhetoric about welfare in this country is that people who do not have paid employment are lazy, degenerate parasites. We heard a lot of this with TANF reauthorization. I think the only response to that is a question: Why has this line of reasoning never applied to Laura Bush? She is a long-term unemployed person, who is completely dependent. But of course, it’s a class thing. If you’re an upper middle class or upper class woman, you’re supposed to stay home. If you’re a working class or poor woman, then you better be out of the home.

6. TANF PROVIDES JOB TRAINING AND CHILDCARE SUPPORT

Although complete accountability and obedience to every little regulation is required of recipients, no accountability is applied to the bureaucrats. I want to give you one example that has stuck in my mind about a woman in Michigan. She had been on welfare and was pushed into work by the work requirements of TANF. She got a job in a Target store, but the childcare subsidy she was supposed to get did not come through. Apparently this happens a lot. So she had to bring her four-year-old to Target with her. She was working as a cashier and had the kid sitting on a stool behind the counter with her. Her managers said she couldn’t do this. She kept doing it and was fired. She went back to TANF and found out that she had been sanctioned. Her benefits were reduced because she lost her job. There was no accountability on the side of the bureaucracy.

7. A JOB CAN LIFT A FAMILY OUT OF POVERTY

The average person who has come off of welfare in the last five years earns about seven dollars an hour. That’s the nationwide average. For my book, “Nickel and Dime,” I tried, as a journalist, to see if I could support myself on the wages I could make as an entry-level worker. In three differ-

ent cities I tried to find the cheapest possible place to live and the best paying job I could, consistent with not using my actual experience. I worked as a waitress, hotel housekeeper, nursing home aide, cleaning person with a house cleaning service, and finally a Wal-Mart “associate.”

I could not make ends meet on seven dollars an hour. I can’t imagine how a family can make ends meet on seven or eight dollars an hour.

8. THERE WILL ALWAYS BE ENOUGH JOBS

There is an assumption that there will always be enough jobs. The idea in 1996 was that everybody on welfare should get off of her butt and get into the job market. Nobody stopped to think that there might, someday, be an economic downturn. The mid to late-nineties were boom time. There was even an idea floating around in 1996 and 1997 that the business cycle had ended; that America had an entitlement to permanent prosperity. There was talk about one economy for America. In reality, there are two economies in America, and the one I entered in my journalistic experiment as a low-wage worker was an economy in a *permanent depression*. That economy was completely unaffected by the boom of the nineties and the dot.com bubble. But there were Senators, Congress people, and think tank residents who did not bother to think ahead to the possibility of an economic downturn. That sounds like the very kind of irresponsibility they were accusing welfare recipients of . . . not thinking and planning ahead.

9. IMMIGRANTS COME HERE FOR THE WELFARE

There seems to be an assumption that people come to this country for the welfare benefits. In most states, welfare reform took benefits away from legal immigrants. I don’t think people come to this country for the welfare. If that were what they were coming for, they would be better off going to Sweden or Germany or almost anywhere. They should not come to the United States looking for compassion, mercy, assistance, or kindness because we don’t offer that here anymore.

10. FAMILIES BENEFIT FROM TANF

A major misconception behind TANF is the assumption that any job, flipping burgers, stacking the boxes in a supermarket, cleaning offices at night, is somehow more important than any kind of caring work that could be done within the family, such as caring for elderly people, caring for children, or caring for your partner. The assumption is that those things just don't count compared to whatever you might do in a workplace. This seems to be a very anti-family assumption and I think we should call it that.



We could continue this ‘top ten list’ indefinitely. The question is, considering all of these problems, and considering everything that’s wrong with welfare reform, what’s going on here? Welfare reform was certainly not enacted to help the people who were on welfare or the kind of people who intermittently have used welfare in their lives when they’ve lost a job, often due to a sick child or broken car.

Welfare reform hasn’t helped that much, or helped at all. Despite the success stories that the media has given us of people who have done well in their new jobs or getting off of welfare, we also know from studies that have been done by universities and from the reports of food pantries and shelters that hunger and homelessness has increased. Between 1996 and 2000, America’s Second Harvest, which is a consortium of food pantries, reported that they were facing a torrent of need they could not meet. Those were their words and welfare reform was part of it.

So why was welfare reform enacted? Many saw (and still do see) welfare reform as part of a moral crusade; a moral crusade against those evils of promiscuity, “illegitimacy,” single mother-headed households, and so on. When you carry out a moral crusade against female sexuality and female-headed households, you are carrying on a crusade not just against poor women, but against *all* single mothers, ultimately against all single women, and against

any woman who happens to be independent-minded. More affluent women must understand this. The rhetoric that denounces poor women, as the rhetoric against welfare has continually done, is an attack also on the rights and freedom of *all* women.

QUI BONO?

A question we have to ask ourselves all the time when we face new legislation, policy, or when we listen to our elected officials is *qui bono* . . . who benefits? Who comes out better because of this? If it's not the recipients and working people in general, the group that most clearly benefits is the employers of low-wage workers.

The business associations have long campaigned against welfare. The reason why is pretty clear to see. If we had an adequate welfare system, even a barely adequate welfare system, people would be able to walk away from underpaid and abusive jobs. To the extent that welfare was at any time adequate, and it was barely adequate, it gave workers the ability to say "I'm not working an eleven-hour shift without getting overtime for the time after eight hours," or, "I'm not handling chemicals when I don't know what they are or what they might do to me," or, "No, I'm not taking this kind of verbal abuse." Prior to 1996, there was one important thing about welfare that affected all working people; it meant they had that little bit of a safety net so they could turn away if they had to.

Welfare reform also provides an immediate benefit to employers by delivering these women who are told that they have to get out and get a job immediately, no matter what the job is. Employers benefit through the shaming and stigmatization of people who do not have paid jobs in the capitalist marketplace. I have interviewed employers who have employed women making the welfare to work transition, like people who run house cleaning services. They *love* welfare reform, as you can imagine. It gives them good workers, not surprisingly, who have no alternative, who have no safety net to fall back on, who have to accept whatever treatment they get.

So, the answer to the question, *qui bono*, who's benefiting here, is that businesses are benefiting—at least American businesses that depend on the exploitation of poor people. And the losers are just about anybody who works for wages. If you depress the conditions, the living conditions and the opportunities of one group of working people, you depress everybody's situation. That's how the economy works.

CONCLUSION

Welfare reform and its misconceptions are not just issues for welfare recipients or for poor, single mothers. Welfare reform is definitely not a narrow, special interest issue. It is an issue for all women, for all working people.

We have to get to the point where we realize that we all have to stand together here or we're not going to make it. I'm not poor, at the moment anyway, but when you insult poor women with rhetoric about promiscuity and their degeneracy and so on, when you deprive them in a material sense, you insult me as a woman too. We've got to say that. Similarly, I'm not an immigrant, but when you stigmatize immigrants, or people of color in general, and reduce their opportunities, subject them to demeaning and special kinds of treatment, you make this land a little meaner, a little uglier, and less like any place I can take pride in. We have to say that. You don't have to be black, or brown, or red, or yellow, or immigrant, to say no, not with me. When you grind down working people, you make this a more deeply divided and unequal society with more misery, more crime, more hunger, and more disease. The society which we are becoming is more and more divided: between the gated communities and the trailer parks; between the high rise apartments with their doormen and the crumbling tenements. This is the direction we have been going in and this is not a place where I want to live or where I want my children or grandchildren to ever have to live. We cannot let those who are motivated only by prejudice or greed, or a combination of those things in the case of welfare reform, pick us off one group after another.

Welfare reform is a problem, it has to be a priority for every person of conscience, and beyond that perhaps I should say every person that is conscious in any moral sense. We need to reform welfare; reform and rebuild the safety net for all of us and for the sake of all of us. We need to fight for a living wage for those who work and reliable forms of income support for those who are not doing paid work because they are doing something else. An old working class and Socialist slogan comes to mind, “An injury to one is an injury to all,” and my favorite slogan, “United we cannot be defeated.”