The Women's Committee of 100 Plus, and Our Advertisement in *The New York Times*

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The Women's Committee of 100 Plus [The Committee] is a membership organization that has grown to almost 1000 since its inception about two years ago. Our primary purpose is to organize the feminist community against welfare cuts. The Committee began after Republican “revolutionaries,” led by Newt Gingrich, swept Congress in November 1994. This new majority pledged to act on the Contract With America and to abolish the safety net of a guaranteed minimum income to poor mothers and children.¹

Around the country, numbers of alarmed liberal and feminist women began to phone, fax and e-mail each other, expressing interest in an explicitly feminist protest against the cuts. While it was assumed that women's organizations such as The National Organization for Women [NOW] would officially oppose the cuts,² the imminent threat of welfare repeal called for a fresh way of organizing people to make this fight their top priority. To many welfare activists, the test of contemporary feminism's mettle is whether it will seriously stand up for poor mothers.

In the summer of 1995, The Committee produced a full page public service advertisement, which was placed in The New York Times.³ The advertising agency selected was The Public Media Center of San Francisco. A steering committee hashed out the basic text during a series of cross-country conference calls. An early plan to list the names of hundreds of prominent women as signatories was shelved in favor of more text space.

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The advertisement, reproduced with this article, speaks for itself. It attempts to shatter misleading myths about welfare mothers, to disseminate accurate facts, and to demonstrate that welfare rights represent a fundamental “women’s issue” that feminists of all backgrounds should support.

To save money, The Committee decided to run the advertisement only in the East Coast edition of The New York Times, rather than in the National Edition. Even though The Public Media Center waived most of its fees for both labor and production, the advertisement still cost some $20,000, a very difficult sum for a new and unknown group to raise. Fundraising was made doubly frustrating because of stringent Congressional restrictions on non-profit lobbying.4

Despite these obstacles, we were convinced that only a New York Times public service advertisement could give us visibility in Washington D.C. political circles and New York-based media circles. We supposed that many legislative aides, lobbyists, editorialists and commentators would take note of our advertisement and help gauge the opposition to welfare reform.

After The Committee’s advertisement was published, it was reproduced and placed in the mailboxes of every Senator and Representative in Congress. This was followed up by a round of lobbying Congress members. In the lobbying process, we found that many key staffers were aware of the advertisement, and that these staffers saw it as at least a straw in the wind indicating growing opposition to assaults on welfare.

The Committee requested and was granted a meeting at the White House to discuss welfare reform. We were joined by various women’s organizations, including NOW, the American Association of University Women, the Organization of Business and Professional Women, and the Young Women’s Christian Association. Leon Panetta presided over the White House meeting, where he announced that everyone at the White House was aware of The Committee’s advertisement. The assembled women’s groups presented a united front against any loss of entitlement for poor women and children.

President Clinton later held a second, unpublicized meeting with the heads of a variety of well established women’s organizations. The Committee was not included in this meeting, which covered a range of issues. Having caucused together previously on welfare reform, the group did present a united front opposing the end of entitlement.

Despite the pressure that was placed on him by the organized women’s constituencies, in the Spring of 1995 Clinton gave support to the Senate version of welfare reform, which was opposed by many of Clinton’s own appointees in the Labor Department and the Department of Health and

Human Services. In addition, Marian Wright Edelman, the Clinton’s friend and President of the Children’s Defense Fund, outspokenly opposed the Senate version of welfare reform, and called for a Children’s March on Washington, which was held on June 1, 1996.

Despite the high degree of opposition from fellow Democrats, President Clinton made the decision to sign the Welfare Reform Act not long before the Democratic Convention of 1996, where he launched his re-election campaign. By doing so, Clinton abandoned a key liberal and feminist issue and moved the Democratic Party closer to the Republicans. Clinton emphasized the theme of traditional “family values,” borrowed from his opponents, and created a stark contrast to the Democratic spirit of only four years before, which had been declared “The Year of the Woman.”

The Year of the Woman in 1992 had come about largely in reaction to the way Congress treated Anita Hill’s allegations of harassment by Clarence Thomas. Women’s campaign contributions surged in 1992, and a number of women were elected to public office. In California, two liberal women senators were elected — Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein. Hillary Clinton was promoted as the nation’s first First Lady who was also an independent professional and an advocate of women’s and children’s rights. However, after the Republican sweep of 1994, these women’s voices were quelled in a Clintonian rush to compromise with the conservative forces now totally dominating Congress.

The quieting of the voices of powerful Democratic women was a reminder that even after achieving high office, women in government will often shelve explicitly “women’s issues.” For example, Senators Feinstein and Boxer both voted in favor of the Senate’s welfare reform bill, although Senators Kennedy and Moynihan withstood administration pressure and voted against the bill. Today Hillary Clinton, once chair of the board of the Children’s Defense Fund, is silent on the role of welfare in poor children’s survival. Ms. Clinton’s experience in office has confirmed that no role offers less entitlement to public leadership than that of wife.

Against this background, the need for an independent women’s movement stands out. A large portion of the money that is now raised for feminist causes goes to election-oriented groups such as “Emily’s List” and the “Women’s Campaign Fund.” Mainstream organizations such as NOW and Women’s Political Caucus also have focused on getting women to run for office. When the mainstream of the Democratic Party takes leave of an overwhelmingly important feminist issue, the women’s movement must turn to other sources of leadership, such as ad hoc mobilization like our welfare-defense project. The question then becomes, how can the women’s

movement exert political pressure? And how can this pressure be most effectively exerted on the prominent politicians, male and female, whom the women’s movement helped to elect?

If Clinton had compromised on abortion rights instead of welfare reform, the political chain reaction would have been quick and forceful. The majority of Democrats, male and female, would feel betrayed by any backing down on that issue — especially on the part of women representatives. Upholding the legality of the pro-choice position is not contested among feminists or democrats. The same cannot be said of welfare rights.

Unlike abortion rights, welfare rights do not intrinsically affect women of all classes, but only poor women. Furthermore, abortion rights foster women’s independence, freedom from unwanted maternity, and the ability of women to be perceived as man’s equal in all things. Welfare is needed by women who are not independent, are not free from maternity, wanted or unwanted, and are neither equal to men as breadwinners nor able to depend on a man for financial support.

In principle, most feminist organizations speak of their commitment to women of all classes. Women scholars and policy analysts have focussed attention on the feminization of poverty, and feminist groups have long advocated welfare rights as well as universal child-care, wage equality and other reforms that would primarily benefit poor women.

On the other hand, large non-profit organizations support themselves on dues and donations paid by mostly middle class constituencies. As a result, the middle class portions of the women’s movement must respond positively to an issue for that issue to get feminist attention. The public, non-profit sector depends on membership numbers and dollars. Just as the poor don’t vote or make campaign contributions, they also do not join many groups that might represent their interests as poor persons. Far from being a “special interest group,” it is rare that anyone lobbies for welfare families.

The under-representation of the poor was evident at the NOW-sponsored “Fight the Right” march in San Francisco on April 14, 1996. Issues included affirmative action, economic justice, abortion rights, reproductive freedom, racism, lesbian, gay and bisexual rights, violence against women, health and child care. Welfare rights were not explicitly demanded. Despite NOW’s historic defense of welfare, this message has been muted at a time when poor women’s rights are most endangered.

The muting of welfare issues may indicate that belittling stereotypes of

7. Id.
welfare mothers remain prevalent among feminists and other progressives. Many working women are convinced that their taxes sustain the long term tenure of lazy and dependant women. Were that a fair description, it should indeed offend feminist sensibilities. The feminist message tells women not to depend on men for support, and not to have children before we have educated ourselves and can support our children. Fighting for the right to live a self-determined life is at the heart of the feminist campaign, but that view may leave welfare mothers, who have temporarily lost the ability to exercise that right, out of the scope of popular, middle class feminism.

Feminism has yet to fully bridge the gap between its “two tendencies.” One serves the interests of women as independent individuals, and the other recognizes our unique needs as mothers. In our society, fathers’ abdication of their role is prevalent, while breadwinner jobs for women are scarce. Feminism must be joined with an understanding of the inequities of class and race, since not all women have the same opportunities.

As long as society prevents women from fully exercising independence, feminism must both fight for that independence and care for women who cannot attain it. As we try to stress in the public service advertisement, welfare is akin to an unemployment insurance plan for mothers. It is a safety net for any mother who is facing life without partnership with a responsible, non-violent, job-holding husband and father. Even women who consider themselves unlikely to ever need welfare can see that such a predicament could befall almost any woman.

The Committee’s experience in welfare rights organizing this past year has reminded us that there are plenty of experts—including hundreds of prominent women in many diverse fields—who oppose welfare cuts, but these experts are not getting heard in the court of public opinion. In the meantime, a great deal of talk about “tough love” and compassion through cutting welfare has been getting aired on talk radio and in popular media.9 It is clear that there is growing dissatisfaction with plans to abolish “welfare as we know it,” yet the stronger trend by far is towards harsh cuts. Both The Washington Post and The New York Times have editorialized against Congressional plans. However, the majority of Americans remain mystified by the far fetched and ungrounded rhetoric of the debate. The public is vastly misinformed about the actual costs of welfare, the potential social costs of filling the cities with homeless families, and the actual nature of welfare families, among many other misconceptions. A vast public education campaign is needed, but it is unclear how this might be organized, and who will pay for it. It may not occur until the city streets start filling up with homeless and hungry mothers and children.

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Why every woman in America should beware of welfare cuts.

Welfare is the ultimate security policy for every woman in America. Like accident or life insurance, you hope you'll never need it. But for yourself and your family, sisters, daughters and friends, you need to know it's there. Without it, we have no real escape from brutal relationships or any protection in a job market hostile to women with children. Why is Congress trying to take it away?

Imagine the worst. You're laid off from your job. You lose your health insurance. Your marriage falls apart. Your young children need child care. And you have no family close enough to help.

This is the kind of thing that "happens to someone else." Someone we like to think is "different." And to underline the difference, we usually figure the woman is somehow at fault.

"Why did she have kids if she can't support them?" we ask.

"What's the matter with her?"

But, at heart, we know how uncomfortably close we are, ourselves, to being without support, without savings. All it takes is a few strokes of hard luck. Hard luck so common, it strikes millions of women with children every year. Women with no job security, in.

Everybody agrees that the current welfare system is flawed. But these reckless and irresponsible cuts do nothing to fix anything. They only make it harder for a woman raising her children to recover from life's hard knocks—which today's system, even with all its flaws, actually manages to do.

That's why we say that welfare isn't supporting failure. In most cases, it's enabling success.

The fact that most women who must resort to welfare find a way off within two years by their own efforts, while keeping their children fed and clothed, says a great deal about them. It certainly demonstrates their "personal responsibility." And it should make the rest of us ask why they're being maligned, threatened and lectured.

Does welfare support failure or enable success? Two true stories:

Juliette Westwood, married for twenty years, had five kids, a house, a

good job. In 1981, she was laid off. She could not support her children alone, and they were on welfare for two years until she could

Gloria Wilson raised her children on AFDC for two years until she could

How defending poor women protects us all.

10 facts most Americans don't know about welfare.

1. Only 8% of welfare mothers are teenagers. Less than 3% of poor families are headed by women younger than 19.
2. The typical welfare family includes a mother and two children. About the same as the average American family.
3. Welfare mothers on average receive $367 a month. Even with food stamps worth $295, this is still 31% below the poverty line for a family of three. Benefits have lost about a third of their value since 1979.
4. Welfare to single mothers makes up just 1% of the federal budget—3% if food stamps are included.
5. Thirty-eight percent of AFDC parents are white, 37% are
with nowhere to turn but welfare—see stories at right.

Would you let your employer take away your health insurance? Would you let the government cancel your social security? Of course not. But the public program that benefits struggling women most—Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—is now considered fair game in Washington. And women are supposed to be quiet about it.

What myths underlie the attack on welfare?

The welfare reform proposal in Congress is based on myths about women and about welfare. Even the phrase describing the bill—the “Personal Responsibility Act,” (taken from Newt Gingrich’s) Contract with America—expounds these myths. It implies that impoverished women with children, unlike people who get VA benefits or retirees on Social Security, are responsible for their own troubles and need a whack from a morality paddle to get back in line.

This is not only insulting, but dangerous. Those who want to cut welfare assume the American job market is hungry for untrained, unskilled workers. It’s not. Mothers shooed off welfare will not find jobs waiting. And even if a mother finds a job available, chances are it won’t pay a living wage that’s enough to cover child care, let alone include health insurance.

A war against poor women is a war against all women.

leaving school, then a serious car accident and divorce left her with nothing but a $50 check from AFDC and $250 a month in food stamps.

“The scariest part about getting off welfare was not having health insurance for the kids. I’d have to go to the emergency room an hour away and then we’d usually wait four hours more.”

Working for the past 24 years, she remembers her AFDC experience vividly. “It infuriates me to hear the politicians talking about kicking mothers off of welfare. Without skills, without education, without medical insurance, without family support, what are these women supposed to do?”

The assault on poor women aims to divide American women, leaving all of us more vulnerable than ever.

Legislation now pending in Congress would end Aid to Families with Dependent Children and critical nutrition programs.

It would free states to reduce their own level of support far below the poverty line.

Most inexcusable of all, it would allow the richest society on Earth to break its most fundamental pledge to women.

That if the worst happens, a woman can keep her children with her, with food on the table and a roof overhead.

These punitive provisions have no offsetting benefits.

They won’t save money, speed women into jobs, improve health care, or provide more child care. They won’t do anything but complete the humiliation of women who have no other choice but jeopardize the well-being of our poorest children.

No American woman has anything to gain from this so-called “welfare reform.” Each one of us has everything to lose. That’s why we ask you to act quickly.

President Clinton must stop this attack on women’s security. Mail the coupon to us, and we’ll speed it along with thousands of others to the White House. And call or write your Senators and Representatives today.

This fight is for all of us. Make sure help is there when women need it most.

African-American, and 18% are Latino.

3. Over 70% of women applying for welfare receive benefits for less than two years; only 8% remain over eight years.

4. More than 60% of AFDC families have a child younger than six. Forty percent have a child younger than two.

5. Full-time, year-round work at minimum wage puts a woman and two children $3,000 below the poverty line—without any health care coverage.

6. Unemployment has steadily increased since World War II, while unemployment benefits have decreased.

7. Carefully conducted research has found that AFDC benefits do not influence a new-married mother’s decision to have a child; nor do they influence mothers already on welfare to have additional children.

Stop the attack on women’s security!

President Bill Clinton
The White House

Son, we called “Welfare Reform” bill removes the only assurance women have that they will always be able to provide for their children. You must put a stop to it now.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Address]

[Phone Number]

Send my urgent message to President Clinton immediately.

Yes, I want more women to learn how much this is at stake. I’m enclosing my contribution to your real educational campaign—$25 $50 $100 $200 $500 or more

[Signature]

[Address]

[Phone Number]

[Name]

[Date]

For immediate effect in Washington, please mail entire coupon to:

Women’s Committee of One Hundred
750 First Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002 (202) 336-8345

The Women’s Committee of One Hundred represents a new mobilization of concerned women—including prominent scholars, artists, elected officials, professionals and activists—pledged to defend women’s security.