

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

Hearing on Welfare Reform: A New Conversation on Women and Poverty

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RECLAIMING THE PROMISE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: POOR SINGLE MOTHERS IN ACADEME

As children, my siblings and I were marked by poverty, our lives punctuated by bouts of homelessness, hunger, lack of medical and dental care, fear and despair. My young mother, a single parent of four, was a hard worker and an intelligent and honest woman who did her best to bring order, grace, and dignity to our lives. Yet, she was trapped in dead end and demeaning jobs with which she could not support, nurture, and provide security for the children she loved. Perhaps not too surprisingly, I followed suit as a young woman, dropping out of school and becoming a single mother involved with a string of men who neglected and abused me, leaving me hurt, frustrated, despondent, and profoundly impoverished.

I know the desperation and hopelessness that shape the lives of poor women in the United States today. Yet, I was fortunate to have been poor and broken and verging on irredeemable hopelessness in an era when education could provide a lifeline for poor single mothers, as it has historically done for so many in our country, but fails to do today. Because of my interaction with a pre-reform welfare system, with superb educational institutions, and with instructors who supported and guided me, I was able to transform my life and that of my child through the life-altering pathway of higher education.

Access to Higher Education Prior to Welfare Reform

I entered college in the summer of 1987, as a single mother and welfare recipient without the skills, self-esteem, or vision necessary to succeed in school. My passage was guided by patient and able teachers whose classrooms became places where I built bridges between my own knowledge of the world and crucial new knowledge, skills, and methodologies. Dedicated faculty created exciting and engaging exercises and orchestrated challenging discussions that enabled me to use my newfound skills to re-envision my gifts, strengths, and responsibilities to the world around me. Little by little the larger social, creative, political, and material world exposed itself to me in ways that were resonant and urgent, inviting me to analyze, negotiate, articulate, and reframe systems, histories, and pathways that had previously seemed inaccessible. The process was invigorating, restorative, and life altering.

As a result, today I have a PhD and am employed as a tenured faculty member at a wonderful college in central New York State. My life and experience are certainly not anomalous. In "Together We Are Getting Freedom," Noemy Vides recalls that her life as a poor immigrant welfare mother began anew when she was encouraged to seek an education. She confides that it

was through higher education that she was "born as a new woman with visions, dreams, hopes, opportunities, and fulfillment," adding that a college education is "the key ingredient in poor women's struggles to survive."

One of my own former students--a young, Latina, single mother of three--now a chemical engineer in California, recently wrote of a similar transformation through higher education. Valuing both the products and the processes of higher education, she reflected:

"School gave me the credentials to pull my three daughters and me permanently out of poverty. After being raised in dire and painful poverty and then watching my own children suffer as I worked for minimum wage [at a fast food restaurant], this is so important to me. Today we own a home, a car, and pay taxes. I have a great paying job, my children excel in school and I can afford to care for them properly. But what is really revolutionary is what education did to our heads. I think differently now, I act differently and my girls relate to our world differently. My mother died broke, an alcoholic living in public housing. My younger sister is in jail and her children in foster care. We have broken that cycle through education once and for all. We are so grateful for this journey."

Indeed, in 1987, the year that I entered college, around the nation almost half a million welfare recipients were similarly enrolled in institutions of higher education as a route out of poverty. Prior to welfare reform in 1996, tens of thousands of poor single mothers quietly accessed postsecondary education to become teachers, lawyers, social service providers, business and civic leaders, and medical professionals. While education is important to all citizens, my experience and my research convinces me that it is essential for those who will face the continued obstacles of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia; to those who have been distanced and disenfranchised from U.S. mainstream culture; and to those who have suffered generations of oppression and marginalization.

Closing Education's Doors to Women on Welfare

Despite a large number of reputable studies confirming the relationship between higher education and increased earnings (and thus financial stability), in 1996, Congress enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) as a part of welfare reform. This act was composed of a broad tangle of legislation that "devolved" responsibility for assistance to the poor from the federal to the state level, and through a range of block grants, sanctions, and rewards, encouraged states to reduce their welfare rolls by developing stringent work requirements, imposing strict time limits, discouraging "illegitimacy," and reducing the numbers of applicants eligible for services. The act also promoted the development of programs and requirements that had the effect of discouraging--and in many cases prohibiting--welfare recipients from entering into or completing educational programs, mandating instead that they engage in "work first."

Specifically, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) work requirements, part of the 1996 PRWORA, drastically limited poor women's opportunities to participate in post secondary education programs while receiving state support. Unlike previous provisions in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and JOBS, education training programs in existence when I first went to college, TANF restrictions from 1996 did not allow higher

education to be counted as "work" and required a larger proportion of welfare recipients to engage in full-time recognized work activities. This work-first philosophy emphasized rapid entry into the labor force and penalized states for allowing long-term access to either education or training.

As a result of the dramatic overhaul of welfare policy in 1996, welfare recipient students left college for low-wage jobs in record numbers. Even as the nation began to embrace the conviction that access to education is the pathway to social and economic mobility, poor women were denied access to education that could have positively altered the course of their lives and those of their children. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in the first year of welfare reform, tens of thousands of poor women were forced to drop out of school. Across the nation, the decrease in enrollments among welfare recipients ranged from 29 percent to 82 percent.

In 1998, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) conducted a preliminary survey of key policy advocates in the fifty states and Washington, D.C., regarding welfare recipients' abilities to enter into and complete educational degrees. The study found that in 1995, almost 649,000 students across the nation were receiving AFDC benefits while enrolled in full-time educational programs; by the 1998-1999 school year, that figure had dropped by 47.6 percent, to fewer than 340,000 students. Today the number is estimated to have been reduced again by over 93 percent, with a national enrollment of less than 35,000 students.

The Personal Cost of Work First Policies

A few years later, the prospects for these students remain dismal. One former computer science major with a ten-year-old son now earns \$7.90 per hour. Recently she described changes in her family's quality of life as a result of the 1996 reform:

"I call it welfare deform. Things are so much harder now. We can barely pay our rent. My son is alone all the time when I work. I just don't see a future anymore. With school there was hope. I was on my way to making a decent living for us. Now it is just impossible to survive day to day. Usually I can't pay my rent. I don't have a cent saved for emergencies. I don't know what I'm [going to] do."

A second student, who was a gifted and dedicated education major, returned to welfare after being forced to leave the university and then losing several minimum-wage jobs because she could not afford reliable childcare and was denied child-care assistance from the state for failing to name her child's father. She described the nightmare of losing job after minimum-wage job in order to care for her child, emphasizing that this was a "choice no mother should be forced to make." She added:

It came down to, if I want to keep this job at [the fast-food restaurant] I have to leave my three-year-old daughter alone or maybe with a senile neighbor. And I couldn't even really afford that! Or we could go back to her dad who is a drunk. If I don't do that, we could both end up hungry or homeless. The choice they are making me make is to either abandon or hurt my daughter, and for what?

Similarly, Tonya Mitchell, the single mother of twins and a very successful pre-nursing major committed to providing health care for low-income and minority populations, was forced to drop out of a nursing program and assigned a "work first position" in a nursing home. She reminds us, "All I wanted was to be a nurse and help care for people. I had a very high grade point average and was on my way to a nursing degree with jobs that pay over \$25 an hour in addition to benefits." Today, after over six years as a nursing aid, Mitchell makes \$8 per hour. In an interview she told me:

"I still need help from the state with childcare and food stamps and life is so much harder for us now than it was before. Clearly welfare reform and the Personal Responsibility Act changed our lives. I do not have the money I need to pay my rent and bills, my twins are in an awful daycare for about ten hours a day while I work in a job I hate, and we have little hope. If we survive it will be despite welfare reform!"

The experiences of students who had worked diligently to become responsible workers, taxpayers, and parents capable of providing their families with financial security, and who were forced to drop out of school to live in perpetual poverty, illustrates one startling failure of 1996 "welfare reform." Certainly not all low-income single mothers are able or willing to go to college. However, to prevent women who can do so from completing post secondary degrees is the mark of shortsighted and fiscally-irresponsible policy.