

Chapter 1

Media Imaging of Welfare-Reliant Women

*Images shape perceptions in very subtle ways,
developing a belief-system more deeply held than rational thought.*

Lucy A. Williams, 1995.

1.1 Race, Class, and Gender Issues in Social Welfare History

Historically, the United States has expressed ambivalent feelings towards the poor and towards the idea of providing them with government subsistence benefits.¹ To these days, Americans seem to be “unsure whether [the poor] are good people facing bad times and circumstances”² they are not directly responsible for or “bad people,”³ unwilling to fit or conform to mainstream societal values.

The poorhouse system – the first form of public assistance for the indigents – originated in the United States between 1825 and 1850 as an alternative to the provision of “outdoor relief,”⁴ the equivalent of a contemporary welfare check, to “undeserving poor.”⁵ Great optimism accompanied the

¹See L. A. Williams, *The Ideology of Division: Behavior Modification Welfare Reform Proposals*, 102 Yale L. J. 719 (1992), 721.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴*History of the 19th Century American Poorhouses.*

Available at <http://poorhousestory.com/history.htm>

⁵Generally speaking, in the mid-19th Century people who were deaf, blind, mentally challenged and eventually orphaned children were considered “deserving” or “worthy”

creation of county poorhouses.⁶ First of all, poorhouses were considered a less expensive and more efficient way to ensure long-term relief to the needy.⁷ Most important, supporters of the poorhouse system were convinced that housing “undeserving poor” in “institutions would provide [society with a much needed] opportunity to reform and [even] cure [the paupers] of the bad habits and character defects that were assumed to be the cause of their poverty.”⁸

Although attitudes towards “deserving poor” were less prejudiced and hostile, prior to 1929, state initiatives targeting “worthy” poor were largely discretionary and often underfunded.⁹ Mothers’ Pensions laws constitute a good example of early, local initiatives to help the “deserving” poor. These laws were passed in a number of states during the second decade of the Progressive Era,¹⁰ when women’s wages and working conditions became the topic of a series of government investigations and journalistic reports.¹¹ Publication of these reports, most of which painted a gloomy picture of what was described as “women’s economic exploitation and lost morality,”¹²

poor. In contrast, people who were not affected by a physical disability and were therefore able to work or were not minors and orphans were considered “undeserving” or “unworthy” poor. For a more in-depth analysis of the origins and implications of the distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, see, M. B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor. From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990), 9-10; M. B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 238-39, quoted in L. A. Williams *The Ideology of Division: Behavior Modification Welfare Reform Proposals*, 102 *Yale L. J.* 719 (1992), 722.

⁶See *History of the 19th Century American Poorhouses*.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹See Williams, *The Ideology of Division: Behavior Modification Welfare Reform Proposals*, 721.

¹⁰Progressivism (1900-1920) was based on a philosophy which welcomed innovations and reforms in the political, economical, and social arena, with the purpose of alleviating the rising tensions within society brought about by industrialization, and of assuring people broader control of their governments, improved economic conditions and a greater degree of social justice. At the turn of the twentieth century, industrial capitalism exacerbated inequalities. The rise of giant corporations concentrated the wealth and power of the nation in the hands of a few, leaving the rest of the population struggling with what Progressivism called the “ills of society” – precarious working conditions, poor housing and generalized lack of health care assistance programs. In this context, Progressivism no longer viewed poverty as the result of individual laziness or lack of self-initiative, but as a consequence of “social evils”, circumstances outside and beyond the control of the individual, that required and justified state action on behalf of the needy.

¹¹See M. Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women. Social Welfare Policies from Colonial Times to the Present*, rev. ed., (Cambridge: South End Press, 1989), 184.

¹²A. Kessler-Harris, *Out of Work: A History of Wage Earning Women in the United*

underpinned states' interest in the negative effects of female employment.

In 1910, the majority of working women were single.¹³ Despite the fact that the number of married women entering the labor market was also on the rise, Progressivist concern over female employment and its consequences focused heavily on the single “working girl.”¹⁴ Little or no attention devoted to married women reflected both their smaller presence in the labor force and their ethnical and social characteristics. Married female workers were usually African American or immigrants and extremely poor. One exception to the widespread tendency to ignore indigent female workers was constituted by poor but “deserving” widows and “worthy” divorced or deserted wives who were forced to enroll their children in day care in order to work and afford a living for their families.¹⁵

In 1910, due to shorter male life expectancy, very high occupational death rates, and higher divorce rates – which had jumped from 53 per 100,000 in 1894 to 84 per 100,000 in 1906¹⁶ – 15 percent of all working women were either widowed or divorced.¹⁷ These numbers, which do not include data for separation and desertion patterns among the poor, reached their peaks in urban areas.¹⁸ A 1914 study of 370 women residing on Manhattan's West Side, reported that widows and deserted wives represented 43 percent of the respondents.¹⁹ Similarly, a survey conducted in six working class districts in Philadelphia reported that of the 728 female respondents who were currently employed 237 were widows, 146 were deserted wives and 12 were divorcees.²⁰

The concern of the Progressivist movement for poor working widows fo-

States (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 105, quoted in Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women. Social Welfare Policies from Colonial Times to the Present*, rev. ed., (Cambridge: South End Press, 1989), 184.

¹³See Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women. Social Welfare Policies from Colonial Times to the Present*, 190.

¹⁴Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, 190.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶C. Brown, “Mothers, Fathers and Children: From Private to Public Patriarchy,” in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. L. Sargent (Cambridge: South End Press, 1981), 242, quoted in Abramovitz, 190.

¹⁷See Abramovitz, 190.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹See C. Brown, “Mothers, Fathers and Children: From Private to Public Patriarchy,” 249, quoted in Abramovitz, 190.

²⁰L. Woodcock Tentler, *Wage Earning Women: Industrial Work and the Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 165-166, quoted in Abramovitz, 190.

cused entirely on single women's ability to take care of their children and reflected the widespread view that children were a national human resource that needed to be protected.²¹ The legislative campaign in favor of Mothers' Pensions statutes, which began around 1910, best illustrates the Progressivist attempt to address this issue. At its core, the Mothers' Pensions movement, as it came to be known, focused on the importance of maternal supervision for the development of the child and aimed at allowing "deserving" working single mothers to stay home and raise their children. Lobbied hard by women's groups, Legislatures in every state but nine adopted Mothers' Pensions statutes between 1911 and 1919.

Mothers' Pensions statutes of the early 1910's were modeled after Revolutionary War and Civil War pensions. In 1783, at the end of the American Revolutionary War, the government of the United States began providing soldiers who had been heavily wounded in battle, war veterans, and veterans' indigent widows with modest pensions. However, it was not until 1862, with the advent of the Civil War, that the limited pension system instituted in 1783 quickly expanded in scope and reach.²² Historians often argue that since conscription was not implemented by the United States government until 1863, proponents of an expanded pension system saw gratuities granted to valiant soldiers as an incentive for able-bodied men to participate in the war effort.²³ The pension statute enacted by the Federal government in 1862 came to constitute the foundation of the Federal pension system until the 1890's when the most important revision of the United States pension law – the Dependency Pension Act²⁴ – was passed by the Federal government.²⁵

The 1862 statute established that only former Union soldiers whose physical disability had "incurred as a direct consequence of Military duty"²⁶ or was due to "injuries received or diseases contracted while in military service"²⁷ were eligible to receive government benefits. The benefits' amount depended on both the military rank of the recipients and on the degree of physical disability the veteran suffered from. Similarly, benefits collected by widows, orphaned children, or other relatives of a deceased soldier were

²¹See Abramovitz, 191.

²²See J. L. Gross, *Civil War Pensions* (April 2005).

Available at <http://www.civilwarhome.com/pensions.htm>

²³Ibid.

²⁴The Dependency Pension Act of 1890 established that all former Union soldiers were eligible to receive government benefits, regardless of whether of not veterans had suffered a disabling injury.

²⁵See Gross, *Civil War Pensions*.

²⁶Gross.

²⁷Ibid.

calculated on the basis of the military rank of the deceased. Interestingly, starting with 1873, widows of Union soldiers acquired the right to collect extra benefits for each of their dependent children.²⁸

In contrast, veterans belonging to the eleven states of the former Confederacy were not receiving pensions. Instead, in 1865, at the end of the Civil War, the Southern governments started providing veterans affected by physical disabilities with artificial limbs and housing.²⁹ Historians argue that because of the economic hardship that followed the Civil War and because of the political instability that accompanied the Reconstruction, the ex-Confederate states did not have the financial resources and the political consensus necessary to implement a cohesive pension system.³⁰ In fact, it was not until the 1890's, almost thirty years after the end of the Civil War, that the first pension system was implemented in the South. The provisions regulating eligibility requirements and benefits' amount in the Southern pension statutes followed the scheme previously delineated in the 1892 Federal pension system.³¹ This means that eligibility to receive benefits was established according to the degree of disability suffered by the applicant and that widows, orphaned children and other relatives financially depended on former Confederate soldiers received benefits based on their level of indigence.³²

On average, widows from the South collected lower benefits than they would have collected if their husbands had not perished in the Civil War. Also, eligibility requirements and benefits' amount varied from state to state in the South; and overall, Southern pensions were less conspicuous than Federal pensions.³³

Both the Federal and the Southern states governments continued to grant Civil War pensions to veterans and their families until the mid-1920's. Interestingly, veterans' widows constituted the category of pension's recipients who was more often labeled as "frauds."³⁴

In the early 1910's, local Mothers' Pensions statutes allowed counties to establish non-demeaning grants to support widowed, divorced or deserted wives with dependent children who passed means and moral tests. The first of these statutes was enacted in Missouri in 1911 but its implementation was

²⁸See Gross.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

restricted to only one county.³⁵ Later, in June 1911, Illinois enacted the first statewide Mothers' Pensions program.³⁶ In 1913, 27 of the 46 Legislatures in session discussed the approval of Mothers' Pensions statutes, and all of them decided for their enactment, thus raising the total number of states implementing Pension programs to 20.³⁷ In 1915, eight more states passed Mothers' Pensions laws, and by the end of 1919, 39 states plus the territories of Hawaii and Alaska had Mother's Pension legislations in place.³⁸

The Southern states, which had the largest concentration of African Americans among their population, were the last to join in. In fact, by the year 1933, neither Georgia, nor Alabama or South Carolina had authorized the enactment of Pension programs.³⁹

Despite their quick passage, comprehensive implementation of these laws was delayed in almost every state by their permissive rather than mandatory character. At no point in time prior to the passage of the Social Security Act (SSA)⁴⁰ in 1935, did more than half of the counties nationwide provide pensions to needy mothers residing in their communities.⁴¹

1.1.1 The Great Depression, Male Unemployment, and the Social Security Act

It was the Great Depression that "provided the impetus for [the first] national framework"⁴² of assistance to the poor. The unprecedented rates of unemployment that struck previously employed, white male voters made it "politically impossible"⁴³ to consider the poor responsible for their own indigency.⁴⁴ And so, in 1933, with the passage of the Federal Emergency Relief Act,⁴⁵ the federal government began allocating funds to provide cash

³⁵Abramovitz, 194.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid. Sixteen of these states were West or Midwest states.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰*Social Security Act of 1935, U.S. Code*, vol. 42, secs. 301-1397jj.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Williams, *The Ideology of Division*, 722.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴See *ibid.*

⁴⁵*Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933*, Public Law 73-15, ch. 30, sec. 4(a), 48 Stat. 57 (22 May 1933). The Federal Emergency Relief Act, passed in May of 1933 at the outset of President Roosevelt's New Deal, was the first measure enacted by the federal government in order to minimize the devastating effects of the Great Depression. The Act created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which was allotted a start-up fund of \$500 million to help the needy and the unemployed nationwide.

relief to all indigent, unemployed males and their families.⁴⁶ Yet, legislators considered cash relief a temporary measure to last only until the Depression ended. Consistent with the widespread perception that welfare undermines the values system of its recipients, legislators in 1933 believed that cash assistance could potentially compromise individual moral standards by causing indolence, while work, by contrast, “fostered dignity”⁴⁷ and morality.

It was with the passage of the Social Security Act (SSA) in 1935 that the expression “being on welfare” took on the specific meaning that we attribute to it today.⁴⁸ Similar in its intent to the Federal Emergency Relief Act, SSA was enacted as a time-limited measure targeting only specific segments of the population. It envisioned three distinct types of assistance plans, unemployment insurance, old-age insurance, and federal matching funds for states that chose to provide cash benefits to people who were blind and unemployed and orphaned children.

Unemployment and old-age insurance plans were defined by SSA as social insurance programs. In contrast, financial aid programs to the states were defined by SSA as public assistance programs.⁴⁹ Social insurance programs were financed through workers’ contributions and were considered entitlement programs.⁵⁰ As such, they had a far better reputation than public assistance programs which were funded through tax payers’ dollars and served individuals affected by varying degrees of indigence.⁵¹ Public assistance programs included among others Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), the precursor of the 1965 Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program.⁵²

⁴⁶See Williams, *The Ideology of Division*, 722.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸See M. A. E. Steger, “Social Construction of Welfare Reliant Women in the United States; Implications for Family Survival,” Paper presented at the Seminario Científico Sobre la Calidad de la Educación: Intercambio de Experiencias de Profesionales Cubanos y Norteamericanos, Pinar del Rio and Havana, Cuba, 15-19 February 1999, 2.

⁴⁹See L. Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); M. Weir, A. Skola Orloff and T. Skopcol, *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), quoted in M. A. E. Steger, “Social Construction of Welfare Reliant Women in the United States; Implications for Family Survival,” 2.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²The Aid to Families with Dependent Children program or AFDC was established in 1965 and provided, until 1996, cash assistance to needy children and their adult caretakers who, in the overwhelming majority of the cases, were their single mothers. Although funded jointly by the states and the federal government, AFDC was commonly administered by the states, which were responsible for setting income eligibility ceilings and

Far from being considered entitlement programs, public assistance programs were widely viewed as a privilege. For this reason, in the years following the passage of SSA, the term “being on welfare” derogatorily indicated the act of receiving cash relief under a public assistance program.⁵³ Interestingly, the distinction created by SSA between social insurance and public assistance programs and its moral implications contributed to shape, and in some cases reinforce, public perception of welfare recipients as privileged but “undeserving” poor.

1.1.2 Chaste Widows and Moral Fitness Standards

The 1935 Aid to Dependent Children program designated orphans and white, widowed mothers who had been married to an employed man for a substantial portion of their lives as the sole beneficiaries of monthly cash relief.⁵⁴ Policy makers considered ADC a temporary measure to be replaced by social insurance programs as soon as the dependent children were old enough to be covered under the portion of SSA that dealt with male workers’ compensations.⁵⁵ According to Professor Lucy Williams, a nationally recognized authority in the fields of Social Security and welfare-related law, the American society in 1935 had ambivalent feelings about supporting orphans.⁵⁶ However, it was willing to do so in order to ensure that single mothers could stay home and become the primary caretakers for their children.⁵⁷ In fact, child care provided by non-working mothers in good, respectable homes was key to guarantee that fatherless children would grow up to become productive members of their communities.

Contrary to the intent of its drafters, the ADC program was not short-lived. Single mothers with dependent children continued to be the prime beneficiaries of this public assistance program as it underwent a series of modifications, first in 1965 when its name was changed to Aid to Family with Dependent Children (AFDC), and again in 1996 with the passage

benefits’ amounts. As a consequence, eligibility ceilings and cash benefits varied widely among the states. For example, in 1995, the eligibility ceiling for a family of three ranged from an annual income of \$1,968 in Alabama to \$11,076 in Alaska, while the amount of monthly benefits ranged from \$120 in Mississippi to \$923 in Alaska. See P. Donovan, *The Politics of Blame: Family Planning, Abortion, and the Poor* (New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1995).

⁵³Steger, “Social Construction,” 2.

⁵⁴See Abramovitz, 226-27.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶See L. A. Williams, *The Ideology of Division: Behavior Modification Welfare Reform Proposals*, 723.

⁵⁷Ibid.

of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Despite legislative changes, the second-class status imposed on single mothers who receive cash assistance benefits has remained a defining trait of American welfare policies from their inception in 1935 up to the present day.

Starting from 1935, many states tried to condition and limit ADC eligibility upon the sexual morality of all female applicants through the implementation of so called “suitable home” rules.⁵⁸ The Social Security Act did not contain language explicitly authorizing the use of suitable home rules to determine eligibility for ADC but preliminary legislative debates, such as the ones held during the 1937 Congressional Committee on Economic Security,⁵⁹ encouraged states to bypass SSA and put suitable home policies into effect.

The use of moral fitness standards rather than financial need to determine eligibility for the ADC program, first implemented during the New Deal, became an even more widespread practice after World War II.⁶⁰ In the years following the end of the conflict, 15 states abolished their suitable home provisions but numerous others did not.⁶¹ In fact, a conspicuous number of states enacted further restrictive measures, such as “man-in-the-house” and “substitute father” rules which once again excluded large numbers of unwed mothers, as well as many women of color, from receiving cash relief under the ADC program.⁶² As a result of these newly introduced measures, state welfare departments denied aid to single mothers who took in male boarders, who co-habited with men they were not legally married to, who refused to identify the fathers of their children or whose homes or behavior did not satisfy the moral criteria of the investigating case workers.⁶³ The 1950’s substitute father rules, for example, established that finding a mother and her child living under the same roof of an adult, able-bodied male was sufficient to allow state authorities to consider the man a substitute father

⁵⁸Generally speaking, suitable home rules conditioned eligibility to ADC assistance upon the nature of the relationship that female applicants had with adult males residing in their homes.

⁵⁹See President’s Committee on Economic Security, *Social Security in America, the Factual Background of the Social Security Act as Summarized from Staff Reports of the Committee on Economic Security* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), 239-40, quoted in Abramovitz, 315.

⁶⁰By the year 1960, 23 states, the majority of which in the South, had some type of suitable homes policies on the books. See Abramovitz, 323.

⁶¹See Abramovitz, 323.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., 324.

for matters of parental support.⁶⁴ In other words, the man's presence in the home under investigation immediately disqualified the entire family from receiving ADC financial assistance, regardless of whether the man was actively contributing to the wealth of the household.⁶⁵

Because compelling evidence of an ongoing relationship between a mother on ADC and a co-habiting man was not easy to gather, states created special investigative units who had the duty to uncover the existence of both "unproper" relationships and additional sources of income that indigent mothers may have failed to disclose to the Welfare Department. In addition to examinations of credit records and questioning of relatives and neighbors, special investigative units also carried out surprise "midnight raids" which had the scope to uncover male co-habitants.⁶⁶ If found, co-habiting men were immediately identified as substitute fathers for ADC purposes.⁶⁷

Surprise raids "severely harassed"⁶⁸ ADC-reliant mothers. In 1965, Edward Sparer, a welfare rights attorney, conducted a study on the consequences of midnight raids on ADC recipients and their families and reported that Welfare Departments had instructed investigators to "look in the bedroom, look in the closets, look behind the shower curtain [and] look in the drawers for articles of clothing..."⁶⁹ The same study proceeds to describe a specific instance in which an investigator had been instructed to climb a tree located in front of the bedroom windows of an ADC recipient at nighttime in order to check if a man happened to be lying in bed with the apartment's tenant.⁷⁰

In 1960, eight years before a binding policy against suitable home rules was officially instituted, an incident that occurred in Louisiana brought the degree of harshness that characterized suitable home policies to the attention of the public.⁷¹ In July 1960, a total of 23,330 Louisiana children lost ADC eligibility after the Louisiana government introduced a particularly severe suitable home rule.⁷² In 1960, children born to unwed mothers represented

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶J. Levin and P. Vergata, *Welfare Law and Women: An Analysis of Federal Sexism* (New York: Center for Social Welfare Policy and Law, 1971), quoted in Abramovitz, 324.

⁶⁷See Abramovitz, 324.

⁶⁸Abramovitz, 324.

⁶⁹L. Komisar, *Down and Out in the USA* (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1974), 88, quoted in Abramovitz, 324.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹See Abramovitz, 326.

⁷²Ibid.

70 percent of the Louisiana minors that were thrown off the rolls.⁷³ Interestingly, despite the fact that African Americans accounted for only 66 percent of the overall Louisiana caseload, 95 percent of the newly ineligible families were African American.⁷⁴ The fact that the state of Louisiana offered no alternative financial arrangements in favor of the disqualified children, provoked a wave of public outrage.⁷⁵

In the wake of the Louisiana incident, Arthur Fleming, Secretary of the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, enforced a regulation requiring states to provide a substitute form of cash relief to children excluded from receiving ADC benefits as a result of state compliance with suitable home rules.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, the Fleming regulation failed to address and eliminate the element of prejudice implied in the use of suitable home rules. Therefore, states simply bypassed Fleming's provisions and proceeded to apply different criteria to prevent morally "unfit" women from collecting ADC benefits.⁷⁷

In 1968, the Supreme Court decision *King v Smith*⁷⁸ invalidated Alabama's and other 19 states' man-in-the-house and substitute father rules, bringing the practice of their implementation to an end. At stake in front of the Supreme Court was a substitute father regulation issued by the Alabama Department of Pensions. The regulation denied AFDC payments to children of mothers who co-habited, in or outside the home, with any single or married man. *King v Smith*, a class action suit first argued in front of the United States District Court of the Middle District of Alabama, sought injunctive and declaratory relief against the enforcement of the Alabama substitute father rule. The three-judge District Court granted relief finding the Alabama substitute father policy to be inconsistent with both SSA and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. On certiorari, the Supreme Court affirmed. The opinion, delivered by Chief Justice Warren, held that the Alabama substitute father policy had to be considered invalid on the ground of its inconsistency with SSA provisions regulating AFDC eligibility. According to the opinion of the Court, legal basis for this inconsistency was to be found both in the state of Alabama asserted interest in "discouraging" illicit sexual behavior and illegitimacy and in the fact that

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid., 327.

⁷⁸*King, Commissioner, Department of Pensions and Security et al. v Smith et al.*, 392 U.S. 309 (1968).

the Alabama policy identified as father any adult, able-bodied male living under the same roof of an indigent child, regardless of whether the man in question owed to the child a state-imposed legal duty of support.

Since the passage of SSA in 1935, the privilege of receiving public assistance has been much more easily granted to white, “deserving”, single mothers and their children than to women and families belonging to so called “subordinated” races and classes.⁷⁹ African American women, for example, were denied ADC assistance through a wide variety of mechanisms whose implementation was lobbied hard by concerned Southern Congressmen. The main goal of these legislators was to make sure that both the racial and economic status quo of the South would not be altered or disrupted by the passage of SSA.

By allowing states to determine which percentage of African American women was unable to work outside the home, SSA challenged the long-standing tradition of racial segregation and division of labor that characterized the Southern society. In the eyes of Southern Congressmen, by granting African American women permission to stay home, SSA was reserving to them the same kind of rights and privileges that had been so far a prerogative of white women. As a result of these concerns, Southern states implemented along with suitable homes, man-in-the-house, and substitute father rules so called “employable mother” rules, which disqualified single, able-bodied African American women with school-age children from receiving ADC financial assistance on the ground that their presence in the labor force was compelling. A field supervisor from the South expressed his opinion on the “Negro question” with these words:

⁷⁹For example, from its inception, the language and administration of the Social Security Act allowed the exclusion of African American men from the relief program. Southern Congressmen defeated statutory language that would protected African American males from discrimination in eligibility for old-age pensions. The words mandating that relief could not be denied to any citizen, if qualifications regarding age and need were met, thus providing some kind of protection to African American males, were changed to provide only that length of citizenship could not be used to exclude applicants. This allowed the exclusion of African American men from cash assistance on grounds other than citizenship. See P. Douglas, *Social Security in the United States: An Analysis and Appraisal of the Social Security Act* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1992), quoted in L. A. Williams, *The Ideology of Division: Behavior Modification Welfare Reform Proposals*, 721. Driven by their fear that elderly African American men would help support younger generations, who would have become less dedicated field laborers, these same Congressmen also eliminated specific language requiring the old-age benefits to be “a reasonable subsistence, compatible with decency and health”, thereby retaining state discretion over the amount of cash relief benefits. See J. Quadagno, “Welfare Capitalism and the Social Security Act of 1935,” *Am. Soc. Rev* 49 (1994): 632-33.

“The number of Negro cases is few due to the unanimous feeling on the part of the staff and board that there are more work opportunity for Negro women, and to their intense desire not to interfere with local labor conditions. The attitude that ‘they have always gotten along’ and that ‘all they’ll do is have more children’ is definite. . . There is hesitancy on the part of the lay boards to advance too rapidly over the thinking of their community, which see no reason why the employable Negro mother should not continue her sketchy seasonal labor or indefinite domestic service, rather than receive a public assistance grant.”⁸⁰

Contrary to white women, African American women had historically never been allowed to be primary caretakers for their own children. As Professor Williams points out: “[African American women] were expected to be, and had always by necessity been in the paid labor market . . .”,⁸¹ irrespective of their marital status and household size. “Moreover,” Williams continues, “within the paid labor market [African American women] had traditionally been relegated to specific undesirable jobs, such as domestic or agricultural work, to which they had basically no alternatives.”⁸² Hence, both statutorily – through the implementation of employable mother rules – and practically – because of their role as second-class citizens in Southern society – indigent women of color and their dependent children were excluded from becoming legitimate recipients of public assistance.⁸³ Most important, while white, single women and widows were considered capable of rearing their children to become productive members of society, women of color were generally viewed as unfit or unable to perform such a task.

1.1.3 The Civil Rights Movement and Mandatory Work Requirements

Prejudiced, discriminative attitudes towards African American women persisted until the 1960s, when large numbers of white, single women entered the labor market, thereby changing the image of a “normal, productive, self-fulfilled white woman . . . from homemaker to career woman.”⁸⁴ At the

⁸⁰Williams, *The Ideology of Division*, 724.

⁸¹L. A. Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers: How the Media Discourse Informs the Welfare Legislation Debate*, 22 *Fordham Urb. L. J.* 1159 (1995), 1164.

⁸²*Ibid.*

⁸³See Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers: How the Media Discourse Informs the Welfare Legislation Debate*, 1164.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

same time, during the 1960s, civil rights lawyers and welfare activists forced states to stop implementing arbitrary, discriminatory restrictions to determine AFDC eligibility. As a result, welfare ceased being considered a privilege and became de facto a statutory right. As soon as this change in AFDC's legal status occurred, a uniform means test substituted suitable home, man-in-the-house, substitute father, and employable mother rules in determining applicants' eligibility to cash assistance.

As previously excluded needy women joined the rolls, the demographics of the national welfare caseload changed dramatically. In fact, the percentage of women of color receiving cash relief increased from 21 percent of the mothers on ADC in 1942 to 48 percent in 1961.⁸⁵ Moreover, by 1971, only close to five percent of all welfare female recipients were widows.⁸⁶

Mainly because of this increase in the number of African American mothers and children that relied on AFDC, the American public started to identify women belonging to ethnic minorities as the main beneficiaries of public assistance programs and to accuse them of taking advantage of the system. This renewed hostility towards single, indigent African American women was further reinforced by a 1965 report authored by U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action."⁸⁷ In the report, Senator Moynihan argued that the African American family was "in a state of disintegration"⁸⁸ in which "single-parent families and unmarried childbearing were simply the [result] of unwise individual choices, and imprudent individual behavior."⁸⁹ Moynihan further argued that the main cause for soaring welfare rolls and increased poverty and unemployment rates among members of the African American community, lay in the structural deviations that characterized the African American families, and the families headed by single women of color in particular.⁹⁰

Moynihan defined the Negro family as a "tangled web of pathologies[.]"⁹¹ which included welfare dependency, drug-addiction, indolence, domestic vio-

⁸⁵See C. Crass, *Beyond Welfare Queens: Developing a Race, Class and Gender Analysis of Welfare and Welfare Reform* (May 1999), 5.

Available at <http://www.circlealpha.com/library/feminism/welfarereform1.html>

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷D. P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: 1965). See Steger, "Social Construction of Welfare Reliant Women in the United States; Implications for Family Survival," 3; Crass, *Beyond Welfare Queens*, 6.

⁸⁸Steger, "Social Construction," 3.

⁸⁹L. B. Schorr, *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1997), 179-80, quoted in Steger, 3.

⁹⁰See Crass, *Beyond Welfare Queens*, 6.

⁹¹Crass, 6.

lence and abuse, delinquency, illegitimacy and high incidence of non marital births and teenage pregnancy.⁹² In Moynihan's analysis the list of social hills that afflicted the Negro family was for the most part ascribable to slavery.⁹³ The slavery system relegated African American men and their wives to low- or no-income jobs. This discriminatory work ethic very often prevented men from becoming the primary breadwinners for their families.⁹⁴ By contrast, although meager, equal wages tended to strengthen women's position within their family units. Because women already were the primary caretakers of their children and husbands, equal wages gave them the possibility to become heads of their households.⁹⁵ According to Moynihan, the power struggle between patriarchal and matriarchal values brought about by slavery and its work ethic deeply undermined the authority of Negro fathers and oftentimes pushed them to abandon "their families as failures[.]"⁹⁶ thereby leaving women in charge of affording a life for their dependent children.⁹⁷

Following the publication of the Moynihan report, public perception of welfare mothers started to shift more and more. It abated as the complexion of the welfare population became darker and as it began to include higher numbers of African American mothers and families of the type described by Senator Moynihan. Similarly, public perception of motherhood started to change. It too waned as a new generation of AFDC-reliant mothers were added to the welfare rolls. In the eyes of the American public, this new generation of welfare recipients no longer comprised white, worthy and chaste mothers and widows but Black, lazy breeders. And so, the stereotype of the "Black welfare queen" was born. Apart from being extremely derogatory in nature, this stereotype streamed from a series of both old and new prejudices, such as the idea that African American mother considered welfare a reward and that they purposely got pregnant in order "to work the system."

As Professor Williams points out "the law responded to this shift in imagery by placing [] mandatory work requirement[s] on [AFDC-reliant mothers] for the first time [in the history of social welfare policies]."⁹⁸ Once again, it were Southern Congressmen who lobbied hard to implement the requirements and used the 1967 Amendments to SSA⁹⁹ to secure the pas-

⁹²See Crass, 6.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Crass, 6.

⁹⁷See Crass, 6.

⁹⁸Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers: How the Media Discourse Informs Welfare Legislation Debate*, 1164.

⁹⁹*Social Security Amendments of 1967, U.S. Code*, vol. 42, sec. 1395 et seq., quoted in

sage of what they considered a necessary measure.¹⁰⁰ While the amended bill included the provision of subsidized child care slots in a number of different child care centers¹⁰¹ and financial incentive to work,¹⁰² it also denied federal matching funds for state reimbursement of welfare benefits paid to families where the father had divorced or had never been married to the AFDC female recipient.¹⁰³ It also established participation in work training programs for children over sixteen years of age and their caretakers as a requisite for AFDC eligibility.¹⁰⁴ In August 1997, the House of Representatives “passed the bill in August 1967 by an overwhelmingly 415 to three.”¹⁰⁵

The nature and intensity of the debate that accompanied the passing of these Amendments proves that another crucial shift had taken place in the minds of legislators and policy-makers. AFDC-reliant mothers were now expected to find employment but were not trusted to do so unless mandatory welfare-to-work requirements were in place.

Finally, the language used by Congressmen to refer to the morality of welfare recipients became increasingly laced with “blame and accusations.”¹⁰⁶ For example, in 1967, while working on the authorization of a limited number of subsidized foster care placements, the Senate Finance Committee commented that “a very large share of the [AFDC] program growth is due to family breakup and births out-of-wedlock[,]”¹⁰⁷ and that “some children now receiving AFDC would be better off in foster homes or institutions than they are in their own [low-standard] homes.”¹⁰⁸

1.1.4 The 1970’s, 1980’s and Early 1990’s

During the course of the 1970s, sizable cutbacks in the amount of federal funds allocated to AFDC were made, while the predominant debate on the origin and necessity of welfare continued to focus on Moynihan’s patholo-

Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1164.

¹⁰⁰See Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1164.

¹⁰¹*Social Security Act, U.S. Code*, vol. 42, sec. 620 et seq., quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1164.

¹⁰²*Social Security Amendments of 1967, U.S. Code*, vol. 42, secs. 630 & 632. Repealed. Quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1164.

¹⁰³*Social Security Act, U.S. Code*, vol. 42, sec. 604, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1164.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, vol. 42, sec. 607, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1164.

¹⁰⁵Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1164.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

gies,¹⁰⁹ by then also known as “the culture of poverty.”¹¹⁰

In the early 1980’s, “undeserving” poor, now defined as those who did not comply with white, middle class values, were once again excluded from receiving AFDC benefits.¹¹¹ Even in its 1980’s version, the return to ambivalent feelings towards the “unworthy poor” echoed the time-worn thesis that the receipt of public assistance creates indolence and dependence, while undermining moral values and boosting rather than resolving poverty.

Finally, the ideas, en vogue in the 1960’s, that welfare recipients are personally and solely responsible for their own indigence, and that alternatives to welfare should focus on changing the sexually irresponsible behavior that causes poverty in the first place, reemerged in the public debate over Welfare Reform after the elections of 1994, “when Newt Gingrich became the Republican speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.”¹¹² The argument sustained by Gingrich the House Republicans and was that “programs that subsidize unmarried parents create child misery. The way to reduce child misery. . . is to discourage teenage and adult behavior that brings infants into the world who are destined to live in poverty, by cutting the programs that support them.”¹¹³ In other words, the political platform that Gingrich and the House Republicans promoted in Congress in the months leading up to the passage of the Clinton Welfare Reform challenged “the very idea of a federal entitlement [to public assistance].”¹¹⁴ After the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was signed into law in August 1996, the idea that indigent, single mothers and their children were entitled to welfare benefits was a mere relict of the past.¹¹⁵

1.2 Clarabel Ventura’s Style of Welfare: A Problem of Representation

Women with children who receive cash assistance benefits have very little power to influence the way they are portrayed by the media and news outlets

¹⁰⁹Crass, *Beyond Welfare Queens*, 7.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹See Williams, *The Ideology of Division*, 725.

¹¹²Steger, “Social Constructions,” 3.

¹¹³B. Bergmann, *Saving Our Children From Poverty: What the United States Can Learn From France* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1996), 4, quoted in Steger, “Social Constructions,” 3.

¹¹⁴C. Noble, *Welfare as We Knew It: A Political History of the American Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 124, quoted in Steger, 3.

¹¹⁵See Steger, 3.

as welfare recipients. The media typically describe them as irresponsible, unproductive members of society, whose values have been eroded by years of welfare dependency.¹¹⁶ They are single, African American women and increasingly Latinas and they never fail to sport a disproportionate number of out-of-wedlock children.¹¹⁷ Alternative representations include drug-addicts, child abusers, and unfit mothers who are unwilling to ensure their children's attendance to school or unable to provide them with adequate medical care.¹¹⁸ According to Professor Williams, the media's failure to present the public with equally persuasive counterparts and to account for the diversity that characterizes welfare women's behaviors and attitudes has the effect to encourage a unidimensional, biased response from society.¹¹⁹

On February 2, 1994, the Chicago CNN television station engaged in a typical one-dimensional treatment of a dramatic welfare-related story when reporting that during a drug raid conducted by the Chicago police on that same day, nineteen African American children had been found "living in a squalid, filthy, bug-infected apartment, eating dog food and sleeping on the floor, barely clothed,"¹²⁰ while an adult male was lying alone in a king size bed.¹²¹ Additional news articles and television broadcasts that covered the same news reported that in the apartment "urine and excrement filled diapers [were]...compressed in the corner with dirty laundry and empty candy wrappers,"¹²² that a pantry closet was "lightly stocked with cans of corn, Kool-Aid packages, and large containers of lard,"¹²³ and that one of the children was "playing on a filthy mattress with two cigarettes lighters,"¹²⁴ while another one was "sharing a bone with a dog."¹²⁵

According to an article published in the Chicago Sunday Times on February 7, eighteen of the children were born to five sisters, two of whom had been convicted of drug offenses, and one of whom gave birth to another

¹¹⁶See Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1160.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 1168.

¹²⁰CNN Television Broadcast, *Six Adults in Chicago Charged with Neglecting Nineteen Kids*, (1994), quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1160.

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²²M. Garvey, "19 Kids Found Living in Squalor in Chicago Apartment," *Washington Post*, 3 February 1994, 3(A), quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1160.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴ABC Television Broadcast, *Whose Kids Are These?* (1994), quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1160.

¹²⁵R. Roeper, "19 Kids Mistreated? Our Mistake; Never Mind," *Chicago Sunday Times*, 7 February 1994, p. 11, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1160.

child the same day that the police officers raided the apartment.¹²⁶ A police officer commented that “[t]he only remorse [the adults] showed, was that they did not want to be arrested.”¹²⁷

On February 15, 1994, two weeks after the media coverage of what became known as the case of “the Chicago 19,” an article in the *Glasgow Herald* engaged in another typical example of welfare representation. The article reported that the previous day, a Boston welfare mother had been charged with abusing her four-year-old child “by plunging his hands into boiling water, and then locking him up in his room for two weeks without medical treatment.”¹²⁸ Allegedly, the police had found the boy lying “on a mattress soaked with his own blood and urine, his hands virtually burned to the bone.”¹²⁹ His mother, Clarabel Ventura, who was pregnant at the time and had five other children, was charged with child abuse, mayhem, and assault and battery.¹³⁰ The following day, another article described Clarabel Ventura as a drug-addict, who had put up the family washing machine – allegedly purchased after winning the lottery – for sale and regularly sold her monthly share of food stamps¹³¹ to buy crack.¹³² Clarabel Ventura was also reported to “sen[d] her children in the projects after midnight, knocking on doors to beg for food and money.”¹³³ Additionally, the same article described Ventura as living in a subsidized apartment and as receiving AFDC and goods through the Women Infants and Children program (WIC).¹³⁴

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷J. Heard and J. Thomas, “Families Children Began 40 Years Ago; 19 Children Doomed from the Start,” *Chicago Tribune*, 5 February 1994, p. 5, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1161.

¹²⁸“Burned Boy Looked Up for Weeks,” *Glasgow Herald*, 15 February 1994, p. 4; see also C. M. Sennot, “Abuse Case Stirs Alarm,” *Boston Globe*, 14 February 1994, p. 19, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1159.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹The federal Food Stamps Act of 1964 is the most significant food plan in the United States. Jointly funded by the federal government and the states, it provides needy individuals with food vouchers that can be exchanged like money at authorized stores to buy food. The federal government pays for the amount of the benefit received, while states pay the costs of determining eligibility, and distributing the stamps. See *Food Stamps Act of 1964*, *U.S. Code*, vol. 7, secs. 2011-36.

¹³²C. M. Sennot, “Abuse Suspect Fought Drugs, Other Woes,” *Boston Globe*, 20 February 1994, p. 1, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1159.

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴Ibid. Food, nutrition counseling, and access to health care services, are provided to low-income women, infants, and children under the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, commonly known as WIC. More specifically, WIC provides grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition edu-

Several days later, on February 20, 1994, the *Boston Globe* devoted an article to Clarabel Ventura's extended family. The *Globe* article focused heavily on Ventura's mother, Eulalia Rivera, who was originally from Puerto Rico, moved to a Boston housing project in 1968 and had seventeen children, "virtually [none] of whom [had] a full-time job."¹³⁵ The reporter who visited Eulalia Rivera's family at their apartment, allegedly found "three of Rivera's sons . . . watching a soap opera, while two of her grandchildren were watching MTV."¹³⁶ The article also stated that when the reporter asked one of Eulalia's sons if he knew the whereabouts of his nieces' fathers, he answered: "Oh, wow, I have no idea."¹³⁷

The problem with media representation of welfare-reliant women is a rather complicated one.¹³⁸ First, as mentioned earlier in this section, the representation of welfare mothers is often one-dimensional and therefore, has the effect of obliterating the diverseness of conducts and inclinations that characterizes welfare recipients.¹³⁹ Second, this representation is almost exclusively based on the life stories of "socially marginalized individuals."¹⁴⁰ As such, it often allows the public to distance itself from what it perceives as "dysfunctional mothers,"¹⁴¹ and to attribute their misery to complete lack of responsibility.¹⁴² Third, because the welfare stories run by the media are not science-fiction, because they accurately portray the reality of everyday's life for at least a small portion of the American female population on welfare, they can be neither overlooked or ignored.¹⁴³ Fourth and foremost, because of the degree of accuracy with which they are presented, and because of their

cation for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children who are found to be at nutritional risk. Established as a pilot program in 1972, and made permanent in 1974, WIC is administered at the federal level by the Food and Nutrition Service of the Department of Agriculture. Formerly known as the Special Supplemental food Program for Women, Infants, and Children, WIC's name was changed to Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children under the Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act of 1994, in order to emphasize its role as a nutrition program. Most states WIC programs provide eligible individuals with vouchers that they can use at authorized food stores. For more information concerning the WIC program see, *Code of Federal Regulations*, vol. 7, sec. 246.

¹³⁵C. M. Sennot, "Finding Four Generations Sustained by Welfare," *Boston Globe*, 20 February 1994, p. 1, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1159.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*

¹³⁷*Ibid.*

¹³⁸See Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1169.

¹³⁹See *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1169.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*

¹⁴²See *Ibid.*

¹⁴³*Ibid.*

absurdness, these hand-picked stories have irremediably affected American public's view of welfare recipients.¹⁴⁴

Context is a fundamental part of every media account. As Professor Williams point out, the media accounts concerning the cases of both the "Chicago 19" and of abusive Clarabel were missing the critical element of contextualization and were therefore completely devoid of objectivity.¹⁴⁵ In only a very few news articles, which did not receive a great deal of attention from the public, other important details were mentioned that if taken into account would allow the readers to form a much more objective opinion of how welfare recipients led their lives and treated their children. For example, in an article that appeared in the *Chicago Sunday Times* on February 4, 1994, witnesses were reported to assert that "much of the garbage found in the ["Chicago 19's"] apartment had been thrown there by the police [itself,] and that the problem [with the] roaches had been present prior to [the family's] tenancy."¹⁴⁶ In another article, published months later in the *Chicago Tribune*, a second witness was reported to show to members of the press present during the police raid a three-foot long grocery store receipt.¹⁴⁷ The receipt showed that the mother of the "Chicago 19" had purchased a month's supply worth of food, including 20 packages of bacon, two 30-pound boxes of chicken wings, a 10-pound bag of rice, milk, toothpaste and shampoo, just 12 days prior to the police inspection.¹⁴⁸ A third article, published at the beginning of February in the *Houston Chronicle*, cited neighbors of the Chicago 19 declaring that the reason why the apartment was so crowded was because the mother of the "Chicago 19" had recently allowed her siblings – who had to abandon their apartment after a fire – and their families to move in.¹⁴⁹ Neighbors also declared that the children were all attending school regularly and that they exhibited no signs of physical abuse or neglect.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

¹⁴⁵See Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1172.

¹⁴⁶L. Baldacci and R. Long, "Mom of 4 Says Cops Trashed Apartment," *Chicago Sunday Times*, 4 February 1994, p. 6; B. Jackson, "Keystone Boy Blames Cops; Police Kicked Trash Around His Home," *Chicago Sunday Times*, 20 April 1994, p. 5, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1172.

¹⁴⁷T. Pelton, "Keystone Kids Neglect Case Unraveling; 75 Misdemeanor Counts Are Dropped," *Chicago Tribune*, 21 April 1994, 1(N), quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1172.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹J. Heard and J. Thomas, "Welfare Is Common Thread in Chicago Neglect Case," *Houston Chronicle*, 6 February 1994, p. 35, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1172.

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

Similarly, a minor news article, published on February 17, 1994 in the Boston Globe explained that it had been the family of Clarabel Ventura who had contacted the Department of Social Services about the injured child, after being unable to convince Clarabel to seek medical care for her son herself.¹⁵¹ Members of Clarabel's family told the reporter that Clarabel refused to take her child to the hospital because she was afraid that Social Services would take her boy away from her.¹⁵² Also, she was convinced that because of who she was social workers would never believe her version of the story, namely that the child himself "had plunged his hands into a pot of hot water that she had mixed with Drano to unclog a tub drain."¹⁵³

Unfortunately, the media perpetuation of one uncontextualized stereotype, and their failure to consider and reveal the root causes for the degree of indigence that characterizes the lives of individuals like Clarabel Ventura, determine and reinforce public acceptance of one reductive imagery as the norm.¹⁵⁴ As Professor Williams summarizes, "although the media occasionally presents welfare images [different] from those symbolized by the Ventura family and 'the Chicago 19', too often they are discounted as anomalies, or reframed to be largely consistent with the stereotype. This allows the public to view [welfare] recipients who do not conform with the [stereotype] as 'exceptional' instead of 'typical'..."¹⁵⁵ Suddenly, all welfare mothers become Clarabel Venturas, the "other" that the public cannot sympathize or identify with.

1.3 The Image We Should See

In a 1997 book titled *Making Ends Meet: How Single Women Survive Welfare and Low Wage Work*,¹⁵⁶ authors Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein provide a different image of welfare-reliant women, describing welfare mothers and their lives at a depth and objectiveness well beyond media representation. The book summarizes the results of a survey of 379 low-income single mothers drawn from four different U.S. cities, Chicago, Boston, San Antonio, and Charleston, South Carolina, and interviewed by Edin and Lein between 1988

¹⁵¹C. M. Sennot, "Kin Says Burns Accident," *Boston Globe*, 17 February 1994, p. 15, quoted in Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1170.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*

¹⁵³*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴See Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers*, 1169.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 1161.

¹⁵⁶K. Edin and L. Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Women Survive Welfare and Low Wage Work* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1997).

and 1992.

In contrast to the media portrayal of welfare mothers, Edin and Lein's conversations with these 379 women reveal that low-income single mothers generally have a much clearer view of what constitutes responsible behavior than the public or policymakers think they have. Not only do welfare mothers struggle to ensure that their children are sheltered, fed, and clothed, but they also do the best they can to make sure that their children are supervised, educated, disciplined, safe, healthy, and loved.

None of the 379 surveyed considered their situation as advantageous. In contrast, almost all of them defined life on welfare as "an exceedingly tedious affair."¹⁵⁷ As a very articulated Chicago respondent put it:

"I don't understand why [Public Aid is] punishing people who are poor. If you want to mainstream them, if indeed the idea is to segregate, to be biased, to create a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, then the welfare system is working. If it is to provide basic needs, not just the financial, but the psychological and social needs of every human being, then the system fails miserably."¹⁵⁸

In order to show their readers how welfare mothers manage their tight budget, Edin and Lein present the case of Donna Carson, who, when interviewed by the authors in 1992, was forty years old and a resident of San Antonio, Texas. Carson, an African American mother of two who, for the most part, had spent her life "playing by the rules[.]"¹⁵⁹ characterized herself as "ambitious and determined."¹⁶⁰

Carson had a high school diploma, got married very young, and conceived her first baby when she was 25 years old.¹⁶¹ Her husband left her before the baby was born and so, shortly after the baby's birth, Carson went back to work while her mother took care of her son.

Ten years later, when Carson got pregnant with her second child, she was still able to afford a decent living for her family. In fact, not only did Carson earn a good salary as a nurse but she was also receiving regular child support payments from her first husband, who was legally obliged to

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 59.

¹⁵⁸Ibid.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 22.

¹⁶⁰Ibid.

¹⁶¹The following recount of Donna Carson's life story is modeled after Carson's original interview with authors Edin and Lein which took place in 1992. See Edin and Lein, *Making Ends Meet*, 22.

contribute to the wealth of Carson's first-born. Once again, after the birth of her second child, Carson went right back to work, while her mother took care of the newborn during the day. Carson never got married to the father of her second child and therefore, once they broke up Carson's partner was able "to bypass the formal child support system" and simply pay \$60 a month directly to Carson.

It was three years later, when the health of Carson's father, who was suffering from diabetes, started to deteriorate and his legs had to be amputated that Carson's financial situation changed abruptly. Carson's mother, who up to that point had provided Carson with no-cost child care, was overwhelmed by her husband's tragedy and had to be checked into a psychiatric hospital. As a result of her mother's nervous breakdown, Carson was left in charge of taking care of her two children and of her disabled father all by herself and had to quit her job and turn to welfare.

Three years later, when Edin and Lein interviewed her, Carson was managing a family of three on a very tight budget. Her monthly AFDC check totaled \$920. Carson used all of this money to pay for food, rent, utilities, children's clothing, transportation, health care, and other basic necessities. Child support payments from Carson's ex-husband had become sporadic and each time she received them her food stamps automatically decreased by \$15 a month.

In order to make some extra money, Carson had started taking care of a neighbor's child five days a week. Carson's neighbor was only able to pay \$100 a month for child care but she paid Carson in cash. This way, Carson's welfare caseworker was unable to detect an increase in Carson's monthly budget and decrease her AFDC monthly check as a result. Carson got the rest of the money she needed to support her family from her father who was paying her \$250 in cash every month to take care of him, and from the father of her second child who was still paying Carson \$60 a month in cash for child support.

Edin and Lein's book also throws light on welfare mothers' everyday life, on their worries, their difficulties and the many ways in which they take care of their children. Under this light, welfare mothers no longer appear unfit. They no longer are lazy breeders, drug addicts, child abusers working the system but caring, loving mothers who spend their times and modest resources trying to afford a decent living for their families.

According to Edin and Lein's survey, besides housing and food, children's clothing seemed "to take the biggest bite out"¹⁶² of all 379 families'

¹⁶²Edin and Lein, 25.

monthly budget. In fact, on average, families spent \$69 a month per child on clothing.¹⁶³ Below are some quotations concerning clothing-related expenses and the strategies that welfare-reliant mothers employed to contain these expenditures:

“In the winter months, I have had to keep my children at home on really cold days, because I didn’t have warm enough clothes to dress them. I have learned to swallow my pride, though, and go to the second hand shops, and try to get the right kind of winter clothes for the boy.”¹⁶⁴

“For shopping I go to yard sales and the Salvation Army for Jay’s clothes. Fortunately, he isn’t the type of kid who always wants to have Nike sneakers or he won’t go to school. I get him K-Mart ones, or I go to the used clothes store [on] Belmont [Avenue]. I probably spend \$200 a season on new clothes for him, but some of those he can wear from season to season.”¹⁶⁵

“My boy he sees those kids that sell drugs. They can afford to buy... [tennis shoes] and he can’t. So I have my little side jobs and [I buy shoes for him]. You got to do it to keep them away from drugs, from the streets.”¹⁶⁶

Edin and Lein’s book also shows that the majority of the women that they interviewed were constantly worried about meeting their children’s day-to-day material needs. One mother commented:

“You know, we live in such a materialistic world. Our welfare babies have needs and wants too. They see other kids going to the circus, having toys and stuff like that. You gotta do what you gotta do to make your kid feel normal. There is no way you can deprive your child.”¹⁶⁷

Edin and Lein point out that this statement captured “a common sentiment among their respondents.”¹⁶⁸ In fact, many mothers affirmed that in their view refusing the occasional treat may “deprive their [children] of normalcy.”¹⁶⁹ For example, a group of Mexican mothers from San Antonio,

¹⁶³Ibid.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 26.

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., 30.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

Texas, told the authors that they saw cable subscription as a cheap way of keeping their children off the streets and off troubles.

Finally, Edin and Lein found that mothers were ready to admit that they needed occasional treats too. Many of the mothers surveyed by Edin and Lein declared that “by spending small amounts on soda, cigarettes, cosmetics, alcohol and the lottery, they avoided feeling that their lives were completely hopeless.”¹⁷⁰ When asked if they could do without them, many women replied that these items gave them “some measure of self-respect and some hope of improving their life situation.”¹⁷¹ One mother said:

“I never buy for myself, only for my son. I take that back. I allow myself two of what I guess you would call luxuries. Well, I guess three. First, I buy soda pop. I do eat meals hardly ever, but I always have to have a can of Pepsy in my hand. I drink Pepsy nonstop. My boyfriend, he buys it for me by the case 'cause he knows how much I like it, and I guess it's the pop that gives me the energy for dealing with my son – you know, the sugar and caffeine and stuff. And then I treat myself to cigarettes. Without the smoking, I would just worry all the time about how we w[ere] going to eat and would never relax. I feel like I deserve some little pleasure, you know, and so those cigarettes keep me up, keep me feeling that things aren't so bad. And the other thing is, I buy my cosmetics. I mean, I go around feeling so low all the time, and the makeup makes me feel, you know, better about myself. I feel like I am not so poor when I can buy myself some cosmetics at the discount house.”¹⁷²

Edin and Lein also report that, contrary to widespread beliefs, only very few of the welfare-recipients they interviewed spent money on alcohol, and that the women who did were moved by similar sentiments:

“Oh, sometimes, you know, just to relax or somethin', I just go out and have a few. And when I'm really low, I sometimes go out and tie one on, if you know what I mean. Sometimes I think I'll go crazy all day in the house if I can't get out once in a while. I just couldn't take it.”¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 31.

¹⁷¹Ibid.

¹⁷²Ibid.

¹⁷³Ibid.

Edin and Lein also discovered that only very few mothers played the lottery with any regularity, and that those who did viewed it “as a sort of escape.”¹⁷⁴

Unfortunately, despite efforts like Edin and Lein’s to portray the female reality of welfare in a more objective way, the prejudiced stereotype that has come to personify female welfare-recipients, their lack of morality and their depravity is still very much a part of American mainstream culture. In the words of Gwendolyn Mink:

“Everybody seems to know someone who has had extra babies to get more welfare. Most adult recipients would like to be in the labor market: 39 percent [combine] wages with welfare or cycle between them; the majority of recipients leave welfare within two years; and two thirds of mothers who leave welfare do so to take jobs. But, everybody seems to know someone who refused to work because she enjoyed ‘welfare as a way of life’.”¹⁷⁵

Because of powerful media imaging, the average American citizen has grown to consider welfare recipients as part of an “underclass,” composed for the most part by African American and Latina women, who live in inner city ghettos, have an outrageous number of children, warped moral values and no desire for a permanent job.¹⁷⁶ Also, by highlighting pathologies, such as child abuse and neglect, once considered typical of Black families, the media constantly reframes welfare as a matter of race and reaffirms the idea that single women of color who are on welfare are lazy, immoral and deviant, while their children are dirty, malnourished and unkept.

It is because of powerful media imaging that legislators implement social welfare policies that are shaped by race, gender and class stereotypes. The Welfare Reform of 1996 is a blatant example of how deeply media imaging of welfare recipients is embedded in the social and cultural tissue of the American society and of how much it continues to shape the scope and reach of social welfare policies. Like public assistance programs that have preceded it, the Reform is also a clear attempt to re-exclude “undeserving” women from receiving cash relief unless they are willing to modify what legislators consider deviant behaviors.

¹⁷⁴Ibid.

¹⁷⁵G. Mink, *Welfare’s End* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 50-51.

¹⁷⁶See Williams, *The Ideology of Division*, 725.

