

Welfare Reform & Women's Education

by Lorna Rivera

I am always amazed when our political leaders create public policies that are based on stereotypes and misinformation. Welfare reform is an excellent example of this. Despite the fact that there is an overwhelming amount of evidence that the more education you have, the more likely you are to access decent paying jobs, many women on welfare have been forced to give up on their education and find "any job" as soon as possible. A significant number of my women adult learners at Project HOPE and at the College of Public and Community Service dropped out of school because of changes in welfare laws that began to be implemented in 1996. A 1997 study by Steve Reuys at the Adult Literacy Resource Institute (ALRI) in Boston found that adult literacy programs throughout the state of Massachusetts experienced significant declines in their enrollments immediately after the welfare law passed. According to Reuys, "Education is no longer encouraged—and is in fact often ac-



tively discouraged—for recipients of public assistance in Massachusetts." As Congress continues to debate this issue (see "What You Can Do"), it is important for us to understand how and why low-income women's access to education is being restricted, and the effects of welfare "work-first" policies on women adult learners and adult literacy programs.

There is a widening gap in U.S. society between the very rich and the rest of us. According to United for a Fair Economy, the average

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT WELFARE REFORM

1. Speak or testify at a city or town meeting.
2. Organize a press conference.
3. Organize a media blitz—contact various media outlets to set up interviews, meet with editorial boards of newspapers.
4. Meet with your elected officials.
5. Write your representatives in Congress to let them know how you feel. (Find your representatives at www.firstgov.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml)
6. Participate in local activist groups by contacting:
 - The Welfare Made a Difference Campaign: www.wmadcampaign.org
 - Welfare Information Network: www.financeprojectinfo.org
 - The Welfare Reform Academy: www.welfareacademy.org
 - The National Welfare Rights Union: www.nationalwru.org

worker earned only \$517 per week in 2003, while the average Chief Executive Officer (CEO) earned \$155,769. The people who are in powerful positions to shape social policies typically come from very wealthy backgrounds and they have the most influence in shaping programs that are supposed to help low-income families. Unfortunately, many of our elected officials have little experience or insight about the everyday struggles of poor families.

Welfare reform passed in the United States as a result of politicians and the media promoting the idea that people are poor because there is something wrong with them as individuals. One of the great myths of U.S. culture is that people are poor because they made bad choices and bad decisions in their lives; they irresponsibly failed to answer the door when opportunity came knocking. Poverty is seen as an individual problem, not as a result of the unfair way our society distributes resources.

The media perpetuates these beliefs by focusing on the individual characteristics of the women who receive welfare, and they "color" these images to make it seem like more recipients belong to racial and ethnic minority groups and that they receive welfare for generations. By focusing on the mothers, the media also downplay the fact that the majority of welfare recipients are actually children. We are more likely to support lifetime limits on public assistance if we feel threatened by welfare recipients in some way—for example by thinking that excessive amounts of tax revenue are going to support these lazy women—even though this is simply not true. We have to buy into the myth that there is something fundamentally different between us and them.

One of the worst things about welfare reform is the effect it has on women's self-esteem. Many welfare recipients are prejudiced against themselves and each other. For example, I will never forget how one of my GED students said that welfare mothers should, "Get off their asses and try to find a man to support them." This particular student had a physical disability and was

a welfare recipient herself. Her remarks sparked a heated discussion in our class about stereotypes and so the women wrote essays about the "realities" of being welfare recipients. One woman wrote: "I'm tired of people thinking I am less than everyone else just because I live off AFDC, cause I know I'm not. And the reason why I said this is because I have a friend that is always talking about mothers on AFDC and it gets me mad. She was

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on it too and now, just because she has a job, she criticizes everyone else that lives off AFDC. When I pass my GED test and accomplish my goal and find the job I want, I will never criticize no one that is going through the same situation I was in." This student identified with other women experiencing a similar "situation." It was an eye-opening lesson about the importance of challenging the self-hatred that weighs down the hearts and minds of poor women, and how internalizing oppressive messages prevents unity among women everywhere.

My own studies, as well as those of Barbara Sparks and Steve Reuys, have documented significant dropout rates and declining enrollments in adult education in the aftermath of welfare reform. Many of the adult education programs that had the greatest decline in enrollments were intensive (20 hours a week) community-based programs that offered classes during the morning hours to accommodate the schedules of mothers with school-aged children. Some of these were participatory learning and popular education programs that, in addition to providing literacy instruction, were also aimed at increasing political empowerment and social change. These programs offered a real possibility of change for

the women who attended them. But it seems that women who need education the most should just stay in low-paying jobs that will never help them escape from poverty.

I believe now is a critical time to confront stereotypes and misinformation about the causes of women's poverty. We could do more to increase awareness about the benefits of education and be more effective in lobbying for access to quality adult basic education. We live in the world's richest country that has the means to eliminate poverty and to provide access to education for all who desire it. We need to challenge bad public policies that perpetuate poverty.

Lorna Rivera works with adult learners in the College of Public & Community Services at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. Contact her at Lorna.Rivera@umb.edu for more information about the studies cited in this article.

Learn More About Welfare @

www.faireconomy.org/press/2004/CEOPayRatio_pr.html
United For a Fair Economy

<http://inequality.org>

Inequality.org is a nonprofit organization that provides information about US inequality with regard to healthcare, technology, economics, education, and other issues.

www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp

Institute for Research on Poverty at University of Wisconsin Madison, is an excellent source for statistics, links, news, research on issues such as health, education, welfare reform, low-wage workers, and child support.

www.cbpp.org

Center for Budget & Policy Priorities has information about Federal Budget expenditures and the congressional reauthorization of TANF.

It's Never Too Late *by Crecelia Jaurequi*

I am from Mexico where I received only eight years of education. On the one hand, it is difficult for a woman like me to go to school. I have to take care of two daughters and a husband. I have to organize my day from early in the morning, deciding what to cook and cooking early. Then I can have time to go to school and try to get the most that I can learn that day. After that I have to go pick up my daughters from their school. When we get home, I review their homework for that day and see how I can help my daughters. It is important for us that I learn English to help and encourage them. It is important for them to be in school and learn as much as they can.

On the other hand, it is fun to go to school because I have friends and I share time with them. We have little conversations as classmates and forget our problems and feel happy being in school. In conclusion, I want to be in school no matter how difficult it is or will be for me.

Crecelia Jaurequi is a student at the Marine Avenue Adult Learning Center and Family Literacy Program at the Harbor Community Adult School in Los Angeles.