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Welfare reform in the United States: gender, race and class matter

Abstract

This article argues that gender, race and class matter in welfare reform. It provides a brief historical overview of the US welfare programme for single mothers; describes the main provisions of welfare reform (enforcing work, promoting marriage and limiting the role of the federal government in wider society); and identifies the impact on women and children. It concludes that welfare reform is best understood as part of the neo-liberal/Right attack on the state.

Key words: children, neo-liberalism, United States, welfare state, women

In a 1972 article in *MS Magazine*, Johnnie Tillmon, president of the National Welfare Rights Organization presented her thoughts about welfare. Back then she declared:

There are lots of lies that male society tells about welfare mothers: that welfare mothers are immoral, that welfare mothers are lazy, misuse their welfare checks, spend it all on booze and are stupid and incompetent. If people are willing to believe these lies, it's partly because they are just special versions of the lies that society tells about all women. (Tillmon, 1972)

Speaking at the height of the women's movement in the United States Tillmon, an African American, single mother on welfare saw that the treatment of women on welfare reflected public anxieties about ALL women's preference for economic independence, personal autonomy, and social justice. Unfortunately few policy-makers, politicians, or advocates heeded her warnings that gender, race and class matter. Nor did they remember her words in the early 1990s – when women and welfare once again became the target of reform. If they had, maybe

welfare in the US would help rather than punish women, support rather than undermine their care-giving work.

Almost everyone has an opinion about today's welfare reform. Most policy-makers and politicians celebrated when the welfare caseload dropped by half in four years falling from 4,159,369 families in December 1996 to 2,264,806 in 2000 and then reached 1,974,751 families in December 2004 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2004c). If cutting the welfare rolls was the main goal of the reform – their applause was justified. But if welfare reform set out to improve the lives of women, something has gone dangerously awry. As Tillmon predicted, the reformers built public support for cutting the rolls by playing to gender and racial stereotypes and demonizing big government (MacDonald, 1997, 1998; Mead, 1992; Murray, 1984). They stigmatized single mothers for failing to comply with prescribed wife and mother roles; depicted women of colour as matriarchal, hypersexed, and promiscuous; and blamed single motherhood for most of society's woes. Despite opposition to big government and contrary to existing data, they produced a programme that still uses the strong arm of the state to regulate the lives of women (Abramovitz, 1996, 2000; Delgado and Gordon, 2002; Hays, 2003: ch. 3; Mink, 1998).

The following analysis seeks to explain why gender, race and class matter in welfare reform. It provides a brief overview of the US welfare programme for single mothers, describes the main provisions of welfare reform and identifies its impact on women and children. It concludes by suggesting that welfare reform was neither accidental nor simply mean-spirited. Rather it is best understood as part of the neo-liberal effort to downsize the state.

Overview of welfare reform

Welfare reform is the name given in 1996 to changes made in the US public assistance programme designed to provide cash benefits just to single mothers (US Congress, 1996). From 1908 to 1935 many, but not all, of the states provided a cash grant to single mothers. Referred to as the 'Widow's Pension', the programme wrongly implied that all recipients had been married. In the early 1900s, the progressive era reformers feared that to acknowledge other types of single motherhood would cause them to lose public support for the programme

they had fought so hard to enact – so they spotlighted those viewed as deserving of public aid (Abramovitz, 1996; Gordon, 1994) (Table 1).

In 1935, the US Congress enacted the Social Security Act which included both universal social insurance and means-tested public assistance programmes. Widely regarded as the foundation of the US welfare state, the landmark legislation transferred legal responsibility for social welfare from the states to the federal government and created an entitlement to income support. The historic shift in social policy was legitimized in the late 1930s by two important events. The Supreme Court declared the constitutionality of federal responsibility for the general welfare and officialdom accepted the economic theory of the British economist, John Maynard Keynes who had called for greater government spending to increase aggregate demand and otherwise stimulate economic growth. In 1962, following the post-

Table 1 Historical overview of the US programme for single mothers

<i>Name of programme</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Programme</i>
Widows' Pensions	1908–35	State programmes, variously implemented
Aid to Dependent Children (ADC)	1935	Title IV of the 1935 Social Security Act; federal/state partnership
Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)	1962	Liberalization of Title IV
Family Support Act	1988	Moves toward mandatory work program with various supports for working mothers
Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) (i.e. 'welfare reform')	1996	The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act

war expansion of the welfare state, Congress liberalized welfare and changed its name from Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) to Aid to *Families* with Dependent Children (AFDC). But it maintained the image of single mothers as less deserving of aid than married women. In 1996, with the rise of neo-liberalism, Congress transformed welfare from a programme to help single mothers stay home with their children into a restrictive transitional work programme called Temporary Aid to Needy Families or TANF (Abramovitz, 1997).

Key provisions of welfare reform

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (US Congress, 1996) was part of an agenda that had three main goals: work enforcement, marriage promotion, and a smaller welfare state. All three focused on changing the behaviour of women, the majority of welfare state clients and workers.

Work enforcement

The best-known provision of welfare reform, popularly known as 'work first', targeted women's work behaviour. To move women off welfare the 1996 law intensified the programme's already stiff work requirements. The reform added more and stricter work rules, expanded workfare which requires that women on welfare without a job work-off their benefits by raking leaves in city parks, filing papers in municipal offices, or performing other unskilled tasks at non-profit human service agencies; and limited access to most of the educational opportunities that had been allowed under prior welfare reform (i.e. the 1988 Family Support Act). Work-first enforced these rules with punishment and deterrence. Women faced benefit reductions (e.g. sanctions) for minor rule violations and local welfare offices deterred applications with long waits, complicated forms, and unresponsive case managers (Hays, 2003: ch. 4; Abramovitz, 2002; Fox, 2000). Most dramatically, for the first time in the history of welfare, Congress imposed a five-year lifetime limit on the receipt of benefits regardless of need. When women reach the limit they have no choice but to take any job regardless of wages, working conditions, or family needs.

Congress adopted the work-first approach despite data showing that most women stayed on welfare for only two years and/or cycled

on and off in response to changed labour market conditions or personal crises (Spalter-Roth et al., 1992). Many women forced off welfare in the late 1990s found work due to the booming economy. Even so, large numbers of former recipients could not make ends meet owing to low wages, part-time work, and the high cost of both childcare and transportation (Boushey, 2001; Cancian et al., 1999; Chapman and Bernstein, 2003; Loprest, 2003b). Many women lost Food Stamps, Medicaid, and subsidized housing; and food pantries and homeless shelters often reported that they had to turn people away (Dion and Pavetti, 2000). This grim picture does not include the presumably worse-off women whom the researchers never found or the women who returned to the rolls. Many of the women receiving welfare today are not highly employable owing to lack of work experience, few employment skills, poor physical or mental health, disabilities and the shortage of childcare services (Loprest, 2002, 2003a). Yet the nation's leaders plan to tighten the work requirements by 1) raising the number of adults that must be at work if the state is not to lose federal funding from 50 per cent to 70 per cent of the caseload; and by 2) increasing from 20 to 35 or 40 the number of hours a recipient must be at work if the state is to receive federal credit on which other funding is based (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2005).

Marriage promotion

The second goal of welfare reform was to promote marriage as the foundation of society (US Congress, 1996). The initial pro-marriage strategy relied on demonizing single motherhood. During the welfare reform debate the reformers evoked gender and racial stereotypes to portray single motherhood as the nation's number one social problem (MacDonald, 1997, 1998; Mead, 1992; Murray, 1984). They implied that crime, drug use, school drop-outs, teenage pregnancies, and drive-by shootings were transmitted from one generation to the next by husbandless women (read women of colour) heading their own families. They added that women on welfare prefer welfare to work, live the good life, cheat the government, and have kids for money. They called for regulating the child bearing, marital, and parenting choices of single mothers (MacDonald, 1997, 1998; Mead, 1992; Murray, 1984).

Three welfare reform provisions reflected this goal: the child exclusion, the abstinence-only grants, and the 'illegitimacy' bonus.

The child exclusion (also called the family cap). Welfare reform presumed that poor women had large families and were having children in order to obtain or increase their cash benefits (Murray, 1984). Designed to limit non-marital births, the child exclusion allowed states to deny aid forever to children born while their mother is receiving welfare. Opponents countered that women on welfare did not have extra-large families and that the average welfare family was a mother and two kids, the same as the rest of the nation (National Governors' Association, 1999). Despite considerable evidence that family caps did not work, 25 states adopted the optional provision of PRWORA.

The 'illegitimacy' bonus. Welfare reform also included an 'illegitimacy' bonus for the five states that had achieved the greatest decrease in non-marital births statewide, while reducing their abortions below the 1995 rate. Beginning in 1999, the winning five states each received a \$20 million supplement. The controversial measure reflected the belief that women on welfare had more 'kids for money' despite government data showing that the increase in benefits that accompanied a birth was too small to be a factor in a woman's decision to have another child (National Governors' Association, 1999). It was also meant to send a message to all women, since the non-marital birth rate and abortion counts were not limited to women on welfare.

The abstinence-only provision initially earmarked \$250 million for school sex education programmes that taught all children attending the school to postpone sex until marriage and prohibited teaching anything about contraception or safe sex (NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, 1999; Sawhill, 2000). Yet by the early 1990s, government data revealed that 60 per cent of all births to never-married women in the United States were unintended suggesting the need for birth control (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1995). It also showed that the non-marital birth rate had started its steady decline long before 1996 especially among teens – the icon of welfare reform (Ventura et al., 2003; University of Michigan, 1994) (Table 2).

The exposure to abstinence-only sex education classes goes beyond the children of welfare recipients since all children attending public schools with abstinence-only programmes must attend these classes.

Table 2 Teenage pregnancy and birth rates, 1990–2000

<i>Year</i>	<i>Pregnancy rates: teens aged 15–19</i>	<i>Birth rates: teens aged 15–19</i>
1990	116.3 per 1000	59.5 per 1000
1996	97.9 per 1000	53.5 per 1000
2000	85.5 per 1000*	42.9 per 1000

*The lowest ever reported since pregnancy estimates began in 1976.

Source: United States *National Vital Statistics Reports* 52(7), p. 3.

[http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr52/nvsr52_07.pdf].

In 1999, nearly one-third of the nation's high schools – more than 10 per cent at faith-based programmes – were offering abstinence-only sex education (Landry et al., 1999). In 2001 alone, 53 of 59 States and Territories received \$43.5 million in federal funds to provide abstinence education, mentoring, and counselling (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2003b). Since 1997, Congress has allocated well over half a billion dollars to abstinence-only programmes which also censor other information about sexual activity and no funds for comprehensive sexual education programmes that teach both abstinence and contraceptive use (American Civil Liberties Union, 2005).

Demonizing parenting by single mothers. Welfare reform also encouraged marriage by demonizing the parenting practices of single mothers (Abramovitz, 2000; Roberts, 1993; Fineman, 1995). On the basis of the untested belief that financial deprivation motivates 'responsible' parenting, welfare reduced the welfare cheque of unmarried mothers viewed as bad parents. For example 'Learnfare' docked the cheques of single mothers with truant children and 'Healthfare' lowered the grant of single mothers whose children did not get their immunization shots on time or missed a paediatric appointment (US Government Accounting Office, 2000; Grossman, 1999; Abt Associates, 2000). But little or nothing was done to improve community conditions such as the lack of local doctors, deteriorating public schools, the shortage of childcare services, high priced grocery stores, substandard housing, and other features common to poor neighbourhoods which undermine effective parenting (Jennings, 2003).

Dead beat dads. Welfare reform also demonized the fathers of children receiving welfare calling them 'dead beat dads' if they did

not pay child support. One week before signing the 1996 welfare bill, President Clinton declared that non-payment of child support was a serious crime, comparing it to robbing a bank or a 7-Eleven store. He warned '[I]f you owe child support, you better pay it. If you deliberately refuse to pay it, you can find your face posted in the Post Office. We'll track you down with computers. We'll track you down with law enforcement. We'll find you through the Internet.' He added: 'If every parent paid the child support they could move 800,000 women and children off welfare immediately' (Hansen, 1999). Welfare reform requires that welfare mothers establish the identity of their children's father(s) and work with child support enforcement officials in demanding that fathers provide financial support or risk loss of benefits. This aggressive approach often ignores the reasons why non-custodial fathers may not be supporting their children. While some men shirk their responsibility and others are not asked, for many others the problem is due to lack of work, too little income, or a second family to support (Sorensen, 1995; Sorensen and Zibman, 2000). Furthermore, increased pressure for child support can lead the father to disappear from the scene and deprive the family of the benefits of paternal visitation. The lost benefits may include a) a reduction in anger, depression and role discontinuity for the father, b) intermittent relief from full-time responsibility for parenting for the mother, and c) an ongoing relationship with both parents for the child (Leger, 2003; Seltzer, 1991).

Healthy marriages. More recently, rather than just demonizing single mothers and dead beat dads, the US government has taken to promoting 'healthy' (that is heterosexual) marriages. Once the work-first approach had exhausted its potential to reduce the rolls, the 'reformers' began to argue that welfare reform had failed to live up to its promise to promote marriage as the foundation of society (Rector and Pardue, 2004; White House, 2002). Since then the Bush administration has proposed the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI). It funds the states to provide premarital counselling, school-based marriage education, fatherhood initiatives, and special services for married couples. In sharp contrast to its opposition to same sex marriages, Congress is poised to spend \$200 million a year in 'healthy' marriage promotion grants as well as \$100 million on marriage-related research and demonstration projects – and not just for those on welfare (US Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

There is consensus that two incomes are better than one. But critics of marriage promotion policies argue that poverty rather than welfare breaks up families. Women's advocates charge that marriage promotion infringes on family privacy, may encourage battered women to remain in abusive relationships, and may push teens prematurely into unstable marriages. By focusing on individual choices, the marriage promotion drive also deflects attention away from the real causes of women's poverty: too few jobs, low wages, childcare shortages, male violence, and the lack of economic recognition for care work (Dailard, 2005; Jones-DeWeever, 2002; Hartmann and Talley, 2002).

What about the children? Despite the emphasis on family values and welfare's intent to benefit children, most welfare policy is directed at adults. The main concern about the fate of children was the provision of temporary subsidies for childcare. But this was marred by a shortage of slots, a complex application process, long waiting lists, the privatization of the services, and often substandard care. According to the National Study of Child Care for Low Income Families (Collins et al., 2000), in 1999 despite a large increase in the number of children receiving childcare subsidies, states on average served only 15 to 20 per cent of federally eligible children and 12 of the 17 states had a waiting list. From 1997 to 1999 most of the growth in childcare subsidies reflected children in families who had left TANF or who had never received it. The Administration for Children and Families reported a six per cent increase in the number of children receiving subsidies in 2000 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2003a). Even so, since January 2001, policy changes in 23 states have decreased the availability of childcare and 26 states give lowest priority to families leaving or who have already exited TANF (US Government Accounting Office, 2003). The National Women's Law Center (2004) reported that many states have reduced income eligibility cut-off points for childcare programmes, increased family co-payments, continued their waiting lists and reimbursed providers at substandard rates.

Beyond childcare, welfare reform paid scant attention to the impact of the law's time-limited access to benefits, tough work mandates, and harsh sanctions (benefit reduction) on the lives of children in welfare households. The same welfare reformers who called upon middle class mothers to stay home with their children, insisted that poor women on welfare work outside the home. This double

standard of womanhood based on marital status is built into the welfare-to-work programmes. It downplays the value of poor single mothers' care work and implies that poor children are better off if their mothers are not in the home. The tough work rules also ignore the difficulties that women, even middle class women with resources, have in balancing work and family responsibilities. Wealthy women solve the problem by hiring other women, often women of colour, to care for their children and clean their house. When asked by researchers, women on welfare talked about the financial and psychological benefits of work. But they also worried about access to affordable quality childcare, the need for time to guide their children, and the impact of leaving their kids for long periods of time without parental supervision (Scott et al., 2001).

Only a few of the official evaluations of welfare-to-work programmes focused on the outcomes of the welfare overhaul for children. Those that did reported mixed results about the complicated dynamics of work, welfare, parenting, and child well being. However, the most positive impact of welfare-to-work programmes on children was related to the programme's ability to improve family's finances. Programmes that improved the family's economic status or maternal education had favourable outcomes especially for children under five. But even these improvements did not bring children to the level of national norms for positive child development. Unfavourable outcomes for children resulted when families showed no economic progress, when their economic situation worsened, and when the children were adolescents (Zaslow et al., 2003). Economic well being also made a difference in a study of health outcomes involving 2,700 households. The rates of hospitalization and food insecurity rose for children under age three in households whose income from benefits fell due to sanctions or other reductions (Cook et al., 2002).

Inadequate income undermined the well being of children in other ways as well. When the loss of welfare benefits (owing to sanctions or reaching the new 60-month lifetime limit) compounded the well-known negative effects of grinding poverty, some poor women found that they could not protect their children from illness, malnutrition, delinquency, or poor school performance (Boushey et al., 2001). A national children's advocacy group reported that, as families reached welfare reform's five-year lifetime limit, the resultant chaos and increase in poverty placed children at greater risk for abuse and neglect (Firestein, 2000). Some mothers lost custody of their

children. Unable to provide for their family, others voluntarily relinquished the care of their children to relatives or to the state, at great emotional cost to themselves. But the already strained child welfare system could not always deliver the supports needed to keep the families together or provide adequate foster care (Firestein, 2000). The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) accelerated the break-up of families (Roberts, 1999). ASFA required social workers to terminate the custodial rights of the biological parent if the parent could not 'shape-up' within 12 to 15 months. The law also promotes adoption as the means for reducing the exploding foster care population. Signed by President Clinton, to foster the safety of children, this child welfare law along with many other systemic forces such as the lack of jobs, income, and housing tends to disadvantage women as they try to regain custody of their children (Child Welfare League of America, n.d.; Abramovitz, 2002).

Reduced federal responsibility for social welfare

The third major goal of welfare reform was to reduce federal responsibility for the programme – or in the words of Bill Clinton, 'to end welfare as we know it'. President Clinton, a Democrat seeking to pull his party to the centre of the American political spectrum, was a major architect of welfare reform (Klinker, 1999). While his initial welfare proposal was less harsh than the version eventually passed by the Republican-controlled Congress, it is widely believed that Clinton supported welfare reform to burnish his own conservative credentials while campaigning against the first President Bush (Deacon, 2003).

Clinton's support for welfare reform played to the well-known racial tensions that US politicians often evoke to win elections (Reed, 1999). The politicians are typically aided and abetted by a media that has forged an invidious link between race, welfare, and poverty, often putting a 'black face' on poverty (Gilens, 1999). When the media paints poverty as black and does not discuss the related issues of racial discrimination or structural racism, it tends to confirm false racial stereotypes and inevitably blames the victim (Neubeck and Casenave, 2001; Gilens, 1999).

This was most recently evident in the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina in the United States. The television pictures of crowded shelters and the high concentration of African Americans left behind were frequently overshadowed by the ongoing, and racially coded,

news reports of looting and shooting, reports which have since been proven to be highly inflated. Only this time around the hurricane's uneven racial impact stripped away the veil that typically covers both racial and class divides in the United States. Many Americans were forced to ask why the federal government took so long to respond, why so many more black and Latino than white people lived in neighbourhoods that were below sea level, and why so many did not have the means to evacuate?

The inept federal response to Hurricane Katrina further highlights what happens when the government sheds its responsibility for general welfare. Welfare reform weakened federal responsibility for public assistance by stripping the welfare programme of its entitlement status and converting it into a state-administered block grant. This change ended the guaranteed federal funding for welfare, placed a cap on total spending for the programme, and subjected it to the political risks of annual Congressional budget review. Funding for TANF expired in September 2002. Since then Congress has passed ten short-term extensions with no change in the law. Fearing a more punitive outcome from an administration that does not believe in an active state, most advocates now favour a 'clean extension', that is, no change in the programme that they initially opposed and continue to see as seriously flawed (Swan, 2004; Mink, 2004).

As with the low-lying flooded neighbourhoods in New Orleans, the poor, women, and persons-of-colour are disproportionately represented among the victims of governmental aloofness about poverty. In welfare reform, like so many US public policies, class, race and gender clearly matter!

Why welfare reform? Welfare reform and neo-liberalism

In the final analysis, the drive to reform welfare was neither accidental nor simply mean-spirited. Rather it is best understood as part of the economic recovery strategy launched by President Reagan in the 1980s, and continued by every US President since then, to stimulate economic growth by redistributing income upwards and downsizing the state.

From 1935 to 1975 the role of the US government expanded steadily. The expansion began in the early 1930s following the first

major economic crisis of 20th century America, the collapse of the economy. At this time, however reluctantly, the nation's leaders blamed the crisis on the failure of the market and saw massive federal spending as the solution. The resulting New Deal programmes included the foundation of the US welfare state.

From the New Deal to the Great Society (1970s) the post-war welfare state expanded in response to prosperity, population growth, the emergence of new needs, and the demands made by the increasingly militant trade union, civil rights, women's liberation and other popular movements (Abramovitz, 1992). The programmes lifted people out of poverty, trained youth for new jobs, increased access to health, mental health and social services as well as childcare, food and housing, and corrected long-standing laws that had tolerated discrimination. The government also collected the taxes needed to pay for these programmes, allowed a mild deficit to stimulate economic growth, and slowly, if only minimally, reduced the large gap between the rich and the poor.

By the mid 1970s, de-industrialization, globalization, and other changes in the domestic and global economy had seriously slowed both capital formation and economic growth. Faced with the second major economic crisis of the 20th century, this time business and government concluded that 'big government', and especially the welfare state, was part of the problem rather than part of the solution. The resulting economic recovery plan variously known as Reaganomics, trickle down economics, supply side economics, or neo-liberalism sought to undo the New Deal. To this end it called for: limiting the (domestic) role of the federal government; shrinking the welfare state; and lowering the cost of labour and weakening the political influence of social movements best positioned to fight back. At the same time the Right gained a firm grip on US public policy and called for the restoration of patriarchal 'family values' and for race neutral social policy. Welfare reform helped to advance each of these goals.

Limiting the role of the federal government

The first neo-liberal goal is to limit the role of the federal government – or to paraphrase Bill Clinton, 'the era of big government is over'. The means to these ends include now familiar tactics, nearly all of which applied to welfare reform. 1) *Tax cuts* for the rich which have

contributed to a massive federal budget deficit, a mounting national debt, and deep cuts in most social programmes except for homeland security and military programmes. 2) *Devolution* or the shift of social welfare responsibility from the federal government to the states – the centrepiece of welfare reform – relies on increased use of block grants which channel limited federal dollars to the states to run programmes while adding to the state's responsibilities. 3) *Privatization* – another feature of welfare reform – shrinks the welfare state by transferring public responsibility for social welfare from the public to the private sector. 4) Finally, *deregulation* weakens federal oversight and/or eliminates regulations that protect the rights of workers, consumers, and the health of the environment.

Government data on federal tax and spending trends document how neo-liberalism downsized the state. It shows that the post-war expansion of federal revenues and spending slowed down in the late 1960s, 1970s or early 1980s (varies by programme), declined thereafter, and reached new lows in the early 2000s.

The overall *federal revenues* rose from 17.5 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 1962, to a high of 19.7 per cent in 1969 and then fell to a low of 16.3 per cent in 2004 (Table 3). The new low reflected the declining progressivity of the US Tax code and the deep tax cuts in 2001 and 2003 which favoured the wealthy over the middle class and the poor.

Lower revenues meant less *total federal spending* which grew from 17.2 per cent of the GDP in 1965 to a high of 23.5 per cent in 1982, only to fall to 18.4 per cent in 2000, below that of 1950, indeed before the US had Medicare, Medicaid, and the interstate highway. The percentage climbed to 19.8 per cent in 2004 due to the war in

Table 3 Federal income tax revenues (% of GDP)

<i>Year</i>	<i>ALL federal taxes</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Individual and corporate taxes</i>
1962	17.5%	1950	9.6%
1969	19.7% (peak)	1970	13.2% (peak)
1996	18.9%	1990	9.5%
2004	16.3%	2004	9.2%

Source: Office of the President of the United States (2006).

Table 4 Total federal spending

<i>Year</i>	<i>Amount (in billions)</i>	<i>% of GDP</i>
1962	\$106.8	18.8
1965	\$118.2	17.2
1968	\$178.1	20.5
1982	\$745.7	23.5
1996	\$1560.5	20.4
2000	\$1788.8	18.4
2004	\$2292.2	19.8

Source: US Congress (2005: 138–9).

Iraq, the rising costs of homeland security, and the costs of reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq (Table 4).

Shrinking the welfare state

The second neo-liberal strategy calls for shrinking the welfare state.

Total domestic discretionary spending (non-military, non-international) rose from 2.5 per cent of the GDP (1962) to a high of 4.8 per cent (1978) and then declined to a low of 3.0 in 1999 (Table 5). Despite increasing to 3.5 per cent of the GDP in 2004, the growth rate had slowed significantly dropping from 12.3 per cent a year in 2002 to 4.9 per cent in 2004 (US Congress, 2005).

Even outlays for the popular, non-means-tested programmes serving the middle class as well as the poor have fallen. This includes both Social Security (US House of Representatives, 2004b) and Unemployment Insurance (US House of Representatives, 2004a; Um'rani and Lovell, 1999). Both programmes help women – who represent 60 per cent of all Social Security recipients and 40 per cent of Unemployment Insurance claimants – to sustain their families and themselves. Social Security spending rose from 2.5 per cent of the GDP in 1962, to a high of 4.9 per cent in 1983, but sagged to 4.3 per cent in 2004 (Table 6). Only spending for Medicare (for the elderly) and Medicaid (for the poor) – two other entitlement programmes – grew reflecting the high cost of health care, especially the high cost of prescription drugs (US Congress, 2005). The Bush administration

Table 5 Total domestic discretionary (non-defence, non-international) spending

<i>Year</i>	<i>Amount (in billions)</i>	<i>% of GDP</i>
1962	\$14.0	2.5
1965	\$22.2	3.0
1968	\$31.0	3.6
1978	\$105.5	4.8 (peak)
1996	\$248.4	3.2
1999	\$277.0	3.0
2004	\$407.1	3.5

Source: US Congress (2005: 140–1).

seeks to retrench these health care programmes by privatizing or otherwise shifting the cost from the government to seniors and to the poor – that is to the consumers of health care services (Ku, 2005; Park et al., 2003).

The programmes for the poor, especially income security programmes, were particularly hard hit. TANF, the programme for single mothers, became a convenient target for neo-liberalism because it serves a vulnerable and unpopular group, not known for high voter turnout. Spending for *means-tested income security programmes* for the poor (including AFDC/TANF) rose from 1.1 per cent of the GDP in 1962 to a high of 2.2 per cent in 1976 but then fell to 1.4 per cent in 2001 (Table 7). With higher poverty rates the caseload grew

Table 6 Federal spending on the social security program

<i>Year</i>	<i>Amount (in billions)</i>	<i>% of GDP</i>
1962	\$14.0	2.5
1965	\$17.1	2.5
1983	\$168.5	4.9 (peak)
1996	\$347.1	4.5
2004	\$491.5	4.3

Source: US Congress (2005: 142–3).

Table 7 Federal spending on Income Security Program (means-tested)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Amount (in billions)</i>	<i>% of GDP</i>
1962	\$6.1	1.1
1976	\$37.6	2.2 (peak)
1996	\$121.0	1.6
2001	\$142.7	1.4
2004	\$190.7	1.7

Source: US Congress (2005: 142–3).

larger leading costs to climb back to 1.7 per cent in 2004 (US Congress, 2005).

The welfare reformers built support for the programme by highlighting the growth of the total AFDC/TANF caseload until the mid 1990s. But, they neglected to add that despite higher absolute numbers, with the exception of 1993, the number of recipients had been falling since the mid 1970s as a percentage of the *total* US population and as a percentage of the *poverty* population. The caseload dropped from a high of 5.2 per cent (1975) of the *total* US population to 4.5 per cent (1996), the year Congress enacted welfare reform (Table 8). During the same period, the caseload dropped from a high of 46.7 per cent (1973) of the *poverty* population to 33.3 per cent (1996) (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2004b). In 2002, six years after the enactment of welfare reform, welfare recipients, most of whom are women and children, represented only 1.9 per cent of the total population and 16 per cent of those living in poverty. However, in 2002 although the poverty rate inched up, only 48 per cent of the families who were eligible for welfare benefits received help, down from 80.2 per cent in the 1980s (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2004a). The use of other neo-liberal tactics, such as the devolution of welfare responsibility to the states via block grants and the privatization of many welfare-to-work programmes, has also helped to shrink the federal role in social welfare provision. The retrenchment of the welfare state has also cost many women (and men) the public sector jobs that had once lifted them into the middle class.

Table 8 AFDC/TANF caseload

<i>Absolute numbers</i>		<i>% of total population</i>		<i>% of poverty population</i>	
<i>Year</i>	<i>In millions</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1970	8.3	1970	4.1	1970	32.7
1973	10.7	1973	5.1	1973	46.7 (peak)
1975	11.1	1975	5.2 (peak)	1975	43.0
1985	10.8	1985	4.5	1985	32.3
1993	14.0 (peak)	1993	5.4	1993	35.7
1996	12.1	1996	4.5	1996	33.3
2002	5.5	2002	1.9	2002	16.0

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2004b).

Lower labour costs

The third neo-liberal goal seeks to reduce the cost of labour to business and industry. Along with de-industrialization, globalization, and the well-documented attack on organized labour, welfare reform has helped to press wages down for both poor and working class women (and men). Caseload reductions and welfare's tough work rules have flooded the labour market with thousands of new and increasingly desperate workers in search of employment. The increased competition for jobs has made it easier for employers to keep wages low and harder for unions to negotiate good contracts (Table 9).

The New York Times recently reported that the large influx of women into low wage jobs owing to the welfare overhaul had depressed the median wage of women as a whole, not just welfare recipients (Utichelle, 2004). Alan Greenspan, chair of the US Federal Reserve Board, clarified the link between welfare and low wages when he explained that the economy's 'extraordinary' and 'exceptional' performance during the late 1990s was, in part, due to 'a heightened sense of job insecurity' which helps to subdue wage gains (Piven, 1999). Taking women off welfare contributed to this goal. Like a strike fund, welfare (but also Unemployment Insurance and Social Security) acts as an alternative source of income. By reducing fears of unemployment, access to this increases women's leverage on the job.

Table 9 Wage rates

<i>Year</i>	Falling wages
1979–99	9.3% drop in wages for the bottom 10 per cent of the workforce
2002	About 40% of low wage workers lived in families with incomes below 200 per cent of the poverty line (less than \$29,000 for a family of three)
2005	Due in part to welfare overhaul, large influx of women into low wage jobs depressed median wage of women as a whole

It also makes it easier for unions to negotiate good contracts and harder for employers to increase profits by pressing wages down.

Family values

A fourth item on the neo-liberal agenda is the Right's call for family values and race neutral social policy. The Right argues that the welfare state has created a crisis in the family by undermining 'personal responsibility', usurping parental authority, and generally weakening so-called 'family values'. The family values component of welfare reform, described earlier, exploits poor women's dire financial situation forcing them to trade their marital, child bearing, and parenting independence for a welfare cheque. It also continues the deep distrust of parenting by single mothers, especially women of colour, found in most US social welfare policies. These policies blame single mothers for their children's behaviour while, as noted earlier, blatantly ignoring the social and economic conditions that undermine effective parenting. Few supporters of welfare reform knew, or even asked, how women forced to leave welfare coped with sickness, unpaid bills, kids wanting brand name sneakers, men who do not pay child support, or the shame of having to repeatedly ask friends and relatives for time and money.

Critics of welfare on the Right also say that access to government aid induces '*dependency*'. But their real concern may be that access to income outside of marriage, through employment or government aid, actually has the potential to increase women's economic *independence*.

This, in turn, can strengthen women's bargaining power with male partners as well as with employers, enable women to raise children on their own, and otherwise challenge patriarchal structures.

Race neutral social policy

Neo-liberalism also calls for a race neutral social policy and a colour-blind society. But even before this period the US welfare state contained what some call 'welfare racism' (Neubeck and Casenave, 2001). From the start the welfare state favoured assisting white households, especially married couples. Its early programmes excluded African American and Latino families and, over the years, provided them with lower benefits, reinforced discriminatory labour market policies, and otherwise deprived families of colour of the resources needed to adequately care for themselves (Neubeck and Casenave, 2001; Brown, 1999). Pressed by the civil rights movement, some welfare state programmes began to protect persons-of-colour and compensate them for the harsh impact of racial discrimination. These changes helped to mediate the contradiction between ongoing racial inequality and the 'democratic promise' of equal opportunity for all. Although the changes did not eliminate institutionalized racism or even racial discrimination in the United States, the threats they posed to white privilege and white domination launched a racially coded backlash against welfare for the poor.

That advocates of welfare reform capitalized on racialized fears among white voters to build support for the programme is evident in the racialized rhetoric that tainted the entire reform process from the initial debate over the proposed programme, to its implementation, and its outcomes. As noted earlier, the welfare reform debate evoked invidious racial as well as gender stereotypes even though the majority of clients at the time were white. The discourse was fuelled by a media that regularly linked poverty and welfare to race (Gilens, 1999). Many white people turned against welfare thinking (wrongly) that they had nothing to lose.

The implementation of welfare reform also reflected racism. During the 1980s the federal government waived federal rules and allowed the states to experiment with many of the highly restrictive welfare measures that were later incorporated in the 1996 law. The most consistent predictor of which states applied for these waivers was the racial composition of its welfare programme (Fording, 2003).

Similarly, the states with larger black populations and larger welfare caseloads were more likely to provide lower benefits, to cut welfare programmes (Johnson, 2003), and to adopt the strictest reforms (Soss et al., 2003).

Discrimination appears in the front office as well. Gooden (1998, 1999) reports that both welfare department case managers and local employers treated recipients differently by race. Despite similar personal backgrounds, work experience, and welfare histories, case managers were more likely to offer white than black clients educational opportunities and work-related supports (i.e. childcare and transportation expenses), while employers were more likely to hire white over black applicants despite similar profiles. As a result, since welfare reform, more white than black women have exited welfare. Between 1996 and 2001, the number of white families fell from 35.5 per cent of the welfare caseload to 30.1 per cent, while the number of black families rose from 36.9 to 39.0 per cent and Hispanics from 20.8 to 26.0 per cent (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Social movements

The fifth neo-liberal strategy is to reduce the power of social movements that are best positioned to resist the attack on the welfare state. It is no secret that US social movements contributed to the strength of the welfare state during the post-war period (Abramovitz, 1992; Piven and Cloward, 1977; Sitkoff, 1981) and that since 1980 they have been on the defensive. One administration after another has taken back some of the hard-won gains made by the trade union, civil rights, gay rights, welfare rights and women's movements as well as weakened workplace, consumer, and environmental protections.

However, the targets of the neo-liberal assaults have resisted. Not always visible on the national front and not always victorious poor women and their allies have frequently disrupted the status quo, in the voting booth, in legislative halls, and in the streets (Abramovitz, 2000: ch. 4). Hundreds of local community organizations have joined forces around a wide range of issues to defend their gains and advance new ones. Following in the footsteps of Johnnie Tillmon, the welfare rights leader quoted at the beginning of this paper, they are part of a long 20th-century tradition of activism among poor and working class women. The women's demands prefigured what the welfare state

would have to provide (1900–35), contributed to its expansion after the Second World War (1945–75), and since the mid 1970s have defended the safety net against the repeated assaults (1975–present) (Abramovitz, 2000: ch. 4). The activists have given voice to the needs of all women for jobs and a living wage, to the rights of motherhood and womanhood, and government support for care work. Their activism shows still another way in which race, class, and gender matter in welfare reform.

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