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Proposition 165: We Won the Battle, but Are We Losing the War

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Commentary

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The uneasy sense of battles won, only to be fought over again, of battles that should have been won, according to all the rules, and yet are not, of battles that suddenly one does not really want to win, and the weariness of battle altogether—how many women feel it?


California's Proposition 165, the "Taxpayer Protection Act," narrowly defeated at the polls in November of 1992, was the most far-reaching and openly hostile attack on poor women that this state has ever seen. The measure was designed to slash welfare and to shift power over the budgetary process from the legislature to the Governor.

Republican Governor Pete Wilson's blatant disregard for the lives of poor women and children became painfully clear when he unveiled Proposition 165, which would have drastically reduced already inadequate welfare benefit levels and imposed new draconian eligibility restrictions. This callous attempt to destroy the already patchy social safety net struck me as a thinly veiled attack on women, since women comprise the vast majority of recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), more commonly known as welfare. The silver lining to this initiative is that it galvanized poor women and advocates into a massive—and ultimately successful—struggle to defeat Proposition 165. I was glad to be a part of this effort, and the energy, creativity, and sheer...

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determination displayed by the “No on 165” campaign workers impressed me. Ultimately, however, I emerged from the campaign feeling that it had inadvertently perpetuated the same destructive myths and social constructs that were so adeptly manipulated by the other side. But let me explain how I came to this conclusion; for just as the personal is political, the political, in my case, is deeply personal.

As a young woman who was raised in middle-class surroundings, I grew up assuming that all the great battles had been fought and won when it came to women enjoying the same rights and opportunities as men. Sure, maybe there was still a dearth of women at the higher levels of corporations and elected office. And maybe single mothers, especially those who were women of color, were still disproportionately represented among the poorest of the poor. Nevertheless, more women were storming into such prestigious, well-paying fields as engineering and law. Furthermore, in stark contrast to my mother’s generation, my generation and our society seemed on the verge of finally accepting that a woman’s place could be outside, not solely inside, the home. As I looked ahead to my future, the opportunities seemed boundless, and I felt thankful that generations of women before me had taken care of most of the hard work necessary to achieve true equality for all women.

This naive optimism was permanently shattered ten years ago when I, at the age of seventeen, unexpectedly became pregnant. Two weeks after bringing my daughter into the world, I sat down on a bench at the local playground and tried to come to terms with my dilemma. With limited education and job skills, I would never be able to find a job that paid enough to cover child care expenses and pay for rent, food, and other basics. With the baby’s father long gone, I had no one to help support my baby and me while I pursued the advanced education I knew I needed to ensure long-term financial stability for my new family. As I pondered the situation with a growing sense of panic, I realized that, with the single act of giving birth—a cause for celebration in most other societies—I had tumbled out of my cozy life as a white, middle-class woman, landing with a hard thump in the ranks of the poor, perhaps permanently.

That afternoon I did something that until then I had never even remotely imagined would be necessary. I walked into the Solano County welfare office and applied for AFDC. A decade later, the details of that humiliating day are still sharply etched in my mind. Perhaps it is because it was that day that I realized two important truths: first, that low-income women have a much truer picture than most middle-class women of the tremendous barriers still facing women of all ethnicities and incomes; and second, that middle-class women are horribly wrong in assuming they are immune to the hardships and injustice faced by their low-income sisters.
My newborn daughter and I endured a mind-numbing, five-hour wait in a hot and overcrowded waiting room, a wait occasionally punctuated by interviews with a weary intake worker who asked a seemingly endless series of humiliating and highly personal questions. When not disclosing the most intimate details of my life, I whiled away the time by talking to some of the women trapped in the waiting room with me. I was astonished by the ranges of education, upbringing, and work experience represented in the room. The woman next to me, for example, was a shy young Latina who had not graduated from high school because she had spent much of her childhood in Salinas lettuce fields to help support her family. With two children under three years of age, she had been on and off welfare for three years while she alternately fled from and returned to an abusive relationship. Another woman there, an impeccably dressed Caucasian woman with elegantly upswept gray hair told me, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, that she had a master's degree in literature. As a stay-at-home mom, she had enjoyed the seemingly secure life of a doctor's wife until the day her husband drained their bank account and took off for parts unknown, leaving her with an overdue mortgage, precious few job skills, and four young children to support.

Despite the obvious differences displayed by those of us sitting around that waiting room, most of the women I talked to shared one striking characteristic: they had worked very hard in their various roles and had played by society's unspoken rules. However, when their circumstances temporarily took a turn for the worse—a divorce, an illness, a job lay-off, an unplanned pregnancy—the bottoms fell out of their lives and they quickly found themselves on welfare, with their options for future financial independence rapidly diminishing.

By the time I left the welfare office that afternoon, having signed control of my life over to the state in exchange for $400 per month, I had irrevocably changed. I had entered that office as an anxious but optimistic young, middle-class woman who still felt that she had her whole life before her. I emerged as a confused, frightened, and newly radicalized "welfare mother" who, for the first time in her life, began to deeply doubt both her own personal prospects and the adequacy of our society's so-called safety net.

During the next seven years these feelings only deepened as I came to know first hand how fundamentally disempowering this "safety net" is, even for those who, like me, have tried hard to fit the role of the good little girl. I came to realize that my middle-class, "play-by-the-rules" upbringing worked against me in this system, and that the polished reasoning skills that had earned me top grades in high school were useless when dealing with indifferent workers and a truly bizarre system of wel-
fare regulations. Playing by the rules of the welfare system brings only frustration.

**THE NATIONAL WELFARE "REFORM" MOVEMENT**

Governor Wilson's attempt to dismantle the social safety net in California is part of a disturbing national trend, reflecting a nationwide exasperation with the current welfare system. In 1992, forty-three states reduced or froze benefit levels, and many also instituted harsh new grant requirements that shamelessly invade low-income women's privacy.¹ The devastating impact of these latest cuts becomes apparent considering that the purchasing power of AFDC benefits nationwide fell by forty-two percent between 1970 and 1990.² According to a recent study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, AFDC benefits nationwide were cut more in 1992 than in any year since at least 1981.³

As welfare payments were slashed, other programs assisting the poor were simultaneously eviscerated. In 1991, for instance, two-fifths of the twenty-six states that appropriate funds for affordable housing cut their programs.⁴ Nonprofit social service organizations have tried to fill the void, but they have neither the resources nor the authority to solve these problems on a large scale. Looking ahead, the cumulative effect of these various trends will be one of unmitigated disaster, as low-income families watch the threads of the safety net being pulled out, one by one. If something does not change soon, we will see unimaginable numbers of homeless women and children on the streets as our society shakes itself free of any pretense of caring about its poor huddled masses. When this comes to pass, there will quite likely be a massive social uprising in this country by the poor and dispossessed.

Therefore, the question now looming in the minds of many of us is just what our new President plans to do about the whole welfare system. So far, President Bill Clinton has sent out mixed signals about his philosophy and intentions. Overall, his statements have revealed a simplistic understanding of the complex economic and social factors that conspire to prevent low-income women from leaving welfare. During his campaign, Clinton proposed several measures that would help low-income people, such as universal health care, expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, and an increase in the minimum wage. Clinton eloquently spoke of the need for compassion toward the poor, and acknowledged that people on welfare are yearning for an alternative. In the next breath, however, he proposed limiting welfare receipt to two years. This propo-

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³ States Cut Welfare Benefits, supra note 1, at 1.
⁴ Facts About Cutting the Poor, supra note 2, at 4.
sal suggests that when Clinton speaks of sacrifices for the sake of deficit reduction, one of the sacrifices he includes is the well-being of the nation’s poor children.

The inability of our President and other supposedly enlightened policymakers to truly “get” what welfare is all about undoubtedly has a lot to do with the fact that most of our elected officials are still upper middle-class, male, and white, while an overwhelming majority of AFDC recipients are female, with a substantial portion being women of color.

I am convinced that our society’s ongoing and deep-seated ambivalence about the proper roles of women lies at the heart of the whole “reform” debate. For example, many leaders from Newt Gingrich to President Clinton agree that welfare recipients should work—without acknowledging that these women already do work. These politicians have no idea what it is like to spend most of their paychecks on rent and then try to feed, clothe, and otherwise provide for their kids on as little as two dollars a day. Furthermore, as the old saying goes, every parent is a working parent, whether or not she works outside the home. Because of our society’s refusal to value and support what has traditionally been the women’s work of bringing up the next generation, poverty still remains very much a female disease. Women represent almost two-thirds of adults living under the poverty line.5

Our society’s deep ambivalence about the growing social and economic freedom of women underlies many failed efforts to address the poverty problem. Throughout this century, the powers that be (men) have chastised the traditionally less powerful (women) who have dared to seek outside work, whether the work has been for survival or for self-fulfillment. Even though our society applauds women CEOs and men who can change diapers, women continue to suffer from our society’s continuing ambivalence about women’s proper roles. Women who try to combine paid work and parenting find it extraordinarily difficult. Women still earn about sixty cents on the dollar compared to men.6 When you combine this continuing wage inequity with an inadequate child care system, the “mommy track” concept, and the long-standing opposition to viable alternative work arrangements such as flex-time and job-sharing, it becomes all too apparent that our society is not as enlightened as we would like to believe when it comes to creating and supporting expanded choices for women.

The weight of this continued societal ambivalence falls most heavily on low- and moderate-income women, who find themselves undermined at every turn as they seek financial independence. Faced with low-wage

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jobs, non-existent child care, and inadequate child support, poor women are forced in increasing numbers to turn to the welfare system for survival following a divorce or other major life change. Although the media herald the phenomenal success of the relatively few women who do make it to the top—the “top” measured by our male-dominated society—the fact remains that most employed women are still relegated to low-status, pink-collar jobs that do not pay well.

The concept of the “undeserving” poor needs to be examined in the context of gender-based discrimination. Women fall into poverty for much different reasons than do men, and thus need very different kinds of assistance to get back on their feet. As a society, we seem much more willing to acknowledge the structural factors that create barriers to employment for men—military base closures, for example—than to acknowledge the different but equally formidable barriers faced primarily by women, such as the lack of child care, discrimination in employment, and sexual harassment.

This inescapable link between gender and poverty makes some aspects of Proposition 165 particularly disturbing, as these aspects were attempts to control reproductive decisions and other very personal details in the lives of low-income women. For instance, since grant levels under Proposition 165 would not have been increased for children conceived while a parent was on aid, the state would have taken an Orwellian interest in determining the date of conception. No exceptions would have been made for women who unwillingly became pregnant through rape, incest, or contraceptive failure.

Social control is a strong element in the welfare system, a fact made clear by the existence of workfare programs. Regarding politicians’ fondness for workfare, Barbara Ehrenreich wrote:

It is as if the men who run things . . . had gone off and caucused for a while and decided on the one constituency that could be safely sacrificed in the name of political expediency and “new ideas,” and that constituency is poor women.7

Given all that has taken place since Ehrenreich wrote those words six years ago, her prescience haunts me. The faulty logic behind these policies emerges in the quasi-fascist sentiments of people like poverty “expert” Charles Mead.

The apparent resistance of disadvantaged people to social norms like work or law-abidingness is not to be taken at face value. They actually desire control, which they typically have not had enough of.8

These attempts at social control pose a serious threat to the human rights of all poor people, whether male or female.

WHY DO STEREOTYPES PERSIST?

As a former welfare recipient who now "passes" in middle-class society, I have often been stunned and dismayed at people's misconceptions and prejudices about welfare, even among those of my politically correct friends and colleagues who supposedly know better. If you asked the average person on the street to describe the "typical" welfare recipient, most people would describe her as a black woman who lives in the projects, has four or five kids, has not worked a day in her life, and has seen welfare dependency pass from one generation to another.

There is tremendous resistance to dispelling this stereotype, and reasons behind this resistance get to the heart of society's attitudes toward women and toward the poor. From the time we are kids, the notion that if you just work hard enough and play by the rules, then you will succeed—that is, you will be rich, or at least solidly middle-class—has been drummed into our heads. According to this reasoning, anyone who is poor must not be trying hard enough or, in the worst cases, willfully refuses to make an effort and therefore fully deserves all the scorn we are able to heap upon him or her.

Maintaining this fiction of moral culpability requires that we adhere fiercely to a stark "us vs. them" mentality in order to reassure ourselves that such an unfortunate fate could never fall upon us. While on welfare, I once had a conversation with a woman standing behind me in the grocery store checkout line, a conversation that was, by turns, amusing, illuminating, and depressing. When my turn came to pay the cashier and I pulled out my welfare check to cash it, the woman behind me, with whom I had been pleasantly chatting, gasped and blurted out, "My goodness, I had no idea you were on welfare. You certainly don't look like one of them." When I smiled at her and calmly asked her what a welfare recipient does look like, she became flustered, looked away, and ignored me for the rest of my time in line. I would be willing to bet that her discomfort stemmed from the fact that I had forced her, if only momentarily, to abandon her comfortable conviction that welfare recipients are different—have darker skin, are not as hard-working, are not as nice.

When it comes to this need to distance oneself from disaster, the conservative policy-makers are masterful at playing up this "us vs. them" mentality. This divide-and-conquer tactic has exacted a tremendous toll not only from low-income women, but from all women. Instead of commiserating with me as a sister whose rights and opportunities have been systematically eroded by the male power elite, the woman in the grocery store found it more comfortable to see me merely as an individual person

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9 For the record, I am white, live in a small town, and usually dress in the suburban uniform of sweatshirt and jeans.
who has failed and who has only herself to blame. The not-so-subtle 
subtext here is: *This could never happen to me.* This attitude functions as 
the rule, not the exception, even among our supposedly more enlightened 
sisters in the women’s movement. Until recently, the National Organiza-
tion for Women and other mainstream organizations have done little to 
reach out to low-income women or to make their issues top priorities. 
This results in both a chasm between the classes and a tremendous water-
ing down of women’s potential for political power. In turn, progress on 
important women’s issues has proceeded at a snail’s pace.

**Some Common Misconceptions About Welfare**

Overcoming the pernicious effects of a systematized sexism that 
keeps most women in this society from realizing their full social and 
political potential requires building common links between *all* women. If 
we are to overcome class barriers among women so that we can work 
together to bring about much-needed change, we must educate women 
across class lines about these pervasive stereotypes. Some of these stereo-
types are outlined below.

1. **Welfare recipients stay on aid for generations, having lots of kids 
to increase their check size and creating a “culture of poverty.”**

   This well-worn claim, fostered for the last three decades by Daniel 
   Patrick Moynihan and others, is absolutely untrue. About seventy per-
   cent of AFDC recipients have one or two children, with ninety-six per-
   cent of the recipients having four children or fewer.\(^{10}\) Most AFDC 
   recipients stop receiving aid within three years, with twenty percent 
   needing aid six months or less.\(^{11}\) My own seven-year stay on welfare was 
   unusually long. Some women do spend years on welfare because they 
   lack basic education, job skills, and/or affordable child care. The solu-
   tion in these cases is not to slash benefit levels to “force” women back to 
   work, but to mitigate these needs through education, job training, and 
   support services that are tied into low-income real-life needs. The basic 
   message here is to beware of ideas described as reform when they are 
   espoused by middle-class think-tank dwellers who have no idea what it is 
   like to try to feed, clothe, and shelter two kids on $600 a month.

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\(^{10}\) **Stanford Center for the Study of Families, Children and Youth Welfare** 
Reform and Children’s Well Being: An Analysis of Proposition 165 (Sept. 1, 

\(^{11}\) *Id.* at 17-18.
2. Welfare recipients are mostly black women who live in inner cities.

In reality, 35% of recipients are white, 29% are Hispanic, 27% are black, and the rest are members of other ethnic groups. Furthermore, rural agricultural counties in California have the largest percentage of families on AFDC. What is true is that a greater proportion of women of color are on welfare, the importance of which should not be overlooked since it is a vivid reminder of the combined effects of racism and sexism in our society.

3. California is a “welfare magnet” for people from other states.

Governor Wilson and others have long argued that California’s welfare benefits—which are the third highest in the nation—act as a magnet for welfare recipients from other states, thus greatly swelling California’s welfare rolls. But the reality is not so tidy. The actual percentage of California’s poor population receiving welfare has remained constant for more than a decade; any recent increase in the number of recipients is due to the overall growth of California’s population and the recession. Furthermore, a study conducted by the state’s nonpartisan Legislative Analyst found that only seven percent of California’s welfare recipients received welfare in another state during the previous twelve months.

Though California offers some of the highest benefit payments in the nation, the extraordinarily high cost of living in the state serves as an economic disincentive to immigration. Low-cost market rents for two-bedroom apartments are higher than the total AFDC grant in ten metropolitan areas of the state, including San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and Los Angeles. There is a severe shortage of affordable housing in this state. Only eleven percent of AFDC families live in publicly-owned or subsidized housing, the lowest rate in the nation. Since very few AFDC recipients receive subsidized housing, poor families spend most of their income on rent.

12 *Id.* at 15.
13 *Id.*
17 *Id.*
4. Welfare payments are a huge drain on the state's budget, and the only way to eliminate the state's budget deficit is to drastically reduce benefits.

California's AFDC payments make up only five percent of the state's $43.8 billion general fund. The estimated $640 million in savings that would have resulted from the benefit reductions proposed in Proposition 165 represent only 1.4% of the total general fund. Since a large proportion of education and other spending categories in the budget are pre-determined by law, support payments for poor women and children comprise a fairly large chunk of what is left to tinker with. Given the noticeable lack of public sympathy for welfare recipients, and the fact that welfare mothers do not have the resources to hire lobbyists or to set up a PAC, it is clear why Governor Wilson probably viewed his initiative as a fail-safe way to please moral conservatives, appease fiscal conservatives, and establish a mini-dictatorship while no one was looking. The point is that no matter what percentage of the state budget is spent on welfare benefits, it is clearly unconscionable to shift responsibility for the state's fiscal crisis onto the citizens least able to bear it. Raising taxes on higher incomes would seem to be the logical first step in addressing the crisis.

5. Welfare recipients are lazy. They could find jobs, but they refuse to work.

First of all, how are we defining work? As I mentioned earlier, being a mother is work, and honorable work at that, even if the pay is pathetic. Even using the more traditional (male) definition of work, a study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) found that four out of ten welfare recipients already work in paid jobs. Furthermore, California has lost hundreds of thousands of jobs in the last year. Governor Wilson's proposals notwithstanding, it seems unrealistic to expect every welfare recipient—many of whom have been denied adequate education or job training—to find jobs that pay enough to cover rent, child care, health care costs, and other essentials. The IWPR study found that policies allowing low-income women to combine work and welfare lift them from poverty and reduce public expenditures. Furthermore, the study noted that economic policies aimed at reducing unemployment may be more cost-effective than punitive policies. People...
people who receive welfare are willing to work but need practical opportunities.

6. Once a welfare recipient finds a full-time job, she is automatically lifted out of poverty.

This myth is one of the most pernicious of all. Assuming that everyone who seeks a full-time job is able to find one, the fact remains that those who work at minimum wage are still very much in poverty and at constant risk of homelessness and other catastrophes. This myth is one of the hardest ones to challenge, because it underlies one of the most cherished tenets of our society: if a person works hard at her job, she will be rewarded with financial independence and ever-increasing opportunities. In reality, the facts point to a harsher economic reality for millions of Americans. The minimum wage has lost so much ground to inflation during the last two decades that it is no longer a ticket out of poverty. With most recent growth in jobs taking place in the low-paying service sector, the number of full-time workers falling below the poverty line has grown drastically in the last decade. To make matters worse, these minimum-wage jobs rarely offer health insurance, child care, or other important but expensive benefits that must then come out of the worker's own paycheck. Women who take low-paying jobs and stop receiving welfare payments will also stop receiving family entitlements to Medi-Cal and Medicaid—frightening benefits to be without in this era of costly health care.

Widespread misperceptions about welfare explain why we Americans can volunteer in soup kitchens on Thanksgiving Day, yet, in the next breath, complain about "welfare cheats" who are sucking up our hard-earned tax dollars. A recent poll revealed that, when asked whether our society is spending too much on welfare, almost half (forty-four percent) of the respondents said yes; but, when "assistance to the poor" was substituted for "welfare," only thirteen percent complained of overspending. Myths and stereotypes are an enduring impediment to true reform.

THE SILENCE OF PROGRESSIVES ON THE ISSUE OF WELFARE

If you are congratulating yourself right now for not falling for any of the stereotypes about welfare recipients described above, you may not entirely be off the hook. If you have not been outraged by efforts nationwide to cut welfare benefits, perhaps you should ask yourself why.

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24 Folbre, supra note 8, at 31 (citing a poll published in the N.Y. TIMES).
I first heard of Governor Wilson's proposed welfare "reforms" as I drove to work one day in December of 1991. I pounded the steering wheel in anger and frustration. As someone who relied on welfare for seven years to keep body and soul together, I knew all too well that if this initiative were passed, thousands of low-income women and children would face homelessness and starvation. Looking around at the bland faces of the people speeding to work all around me, I could not help but feel bitter as I recalled the spontaneous outpouring of protest when the United States went to war in the Gulf. Where are you now? I silently wondered.

Why wasn't there a massive movement to protest in the streets when Governor Wilson announced his plan to cut the financial safety net out from under the state's poorest residents? I have asked myself that question many times during the last several months, and pretty discouraging answers come to mind. In our complicated modern world, we yearn for the return of clear-cut moral issues, where the culpabilities are plain and the choices obvious. For example, in the Gulf War, the issues seemed simpler: United States leaders entered into a war, and the desired end of liberating Kuwait did not justify risking or losing the lives of many.

In contrast, welfare brings up all sorts of uncomfortable issues. These issues include the persistence of racism and sexism, the polarization of rich and poor as the middle class slowly disappears, and the existence of capitalism, which has not quite turned out to be the social and economic ideal we had hoped, even though we won the cold war. In the richest country in the world, people are starving. Considering such things for any length of time invites one to a crisis of conscience, and who wants that? There is a war going on right here in this country, a war against poor people, especially poor women. The war against low-income women in this country may not be flashy or dramatic and may not offer good sound bites, but that does not mean it is not just as real as the Gulf War. Subtle and insidious, this war is cloaked in pious public pronouncements about "fairness" and "mutual responsibility."

Proposition 165 was just part of a growing effort to punish and control low-income women. Many other states are implementing "reform" measures similar to Proposition 165, and even our new President has shown a certain willingness to join in the effort. Opponents to this movement are not speaking out. If current trends continue, we will have plenty of casualties to mourn in this quiet but deadly war against women.

**PROPOSITION 165: WILSON GOES ON THE OFFENSIVE**

Proposition 165 seemed like a brilliant political move for Governor Wilson. By attacking one of the most universally disenfranchised groups around—welfare moms—Wilson engaged in a smart political strategy.
Public opinion polls over the years have shown that, while most people have a general sympathy for poor people, there is less support for welfare recipients. In the California state legislature last year, Democrats and Republicans alike agreed to a 5.8% cut in welfare benefits. At the national level, even Clinton, "the moderate," is clamoring for some sort of welfare reform.

Proposition 165 proposed to alter dramatically the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches in the state, giving the governor the authority to declare a "fiscal emergency" and make budget cuts—indeed, eliminate entire programs—without legislative approval. It was this "power grab" part of the initiative that garnered the most attention during the campaign. However, Proposition 165 would have had an immediate and devastating impact on poor women and their children. The measure would have:

- immediately cut AFDC benefits by ten percent and reduced most grants by an additional fifteen percent after six months;
- denied additional benefits for mothers who bear children while on AFDC;
- permanently suspended cost-of-living adjustments;
- denied any aid—including medical care—to women pregnant with their first child;
- denied aid to teenage parents who refuse to live with their parents, and reduced their grants if they missed a set number of school days;
- limited monthly welfare payments for families who have recently moved to California to the amount received in their state of origin, regardless of the difference in the cost of living between the two states;
- set benefit levels annually, based not on the amount required to survive but on the state's self-defined ability to pay the costs.

The human cost of this initiative would have been enormous, and it would have disproportionately hurt women and children, since most AFDC families in California are headed by single mothers. If Proposition 165 had passed, a single mother with two children would have seen her benefits cut immediately from $663 to $597, and then cut again six months later, to $507. These benefit reductions would have come on top of a 4.4% cut imposed in 1991. A study by California Rural Legal Assistance estimated that 120,000 children statewide would go hungry if the proposal were adopted.25 Stanford professor Michael Wald's analysis of the initiative found that as many as 1.6 million California children would have suffered under Proposition 165.26 Again, the details of Proposition 165 show that the war on poverty is actually a war on women and children.

26 STANFORD CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF FAMILIES, supra note 10, at 1.
PROPOSITION 165 WAS DEFEATED, BUT WHAT WAS WON?

Poor women and their advocates breathed a collective sigh of relief when Proposition 165 was defeated, although the 54-to-46 percent margin was just a little too close for comfort. Though I was disappointed with the initial lack of protest in the streets when Wilson first announced his initiative, I was impressed by the tremendous energy and determination poured into the “No on 165” campaign all over the state. I found it empowering and hope-inspiring to work side by side with a diverse coalition of people, including public interest attorneys, advocates for the poor, social workers, union members, and, of course, low-income women themselves. The concerted effort made to reach out to low-income voters and help them claim their power at the ballot box was particularly exciting. In the San Francisco Bay Area, the National Lawyers Guild, working with the Women’s Economic Agenda Project and a coalition of other advocates, registered hundreds of homeless residents and marched with them to City Hall to participate in “over-the-counter” voting by absentee ballot.

As far as I know, the official “No on 165” campaign approved of and supported this grass-roots organizing. However, the full integration of welfare recipients and other low-income people into the “No on 165” effort—which should have been both the starting place and centerpiece of the campaign’s philosophy and strategy—was not the central focus of the campaign.

Although I am deeply grateful to the hundreds of people who worked their hearts out to defeat Proposition 165, some of the tactics used during the campaign struck me as misguided at best; at worst, the tactics involved a cynical calculation of what it takes to push the buttons of the average voter. For example, it was apparently decided early on (probably through the ubiquitous campaign “focus groups,” which I imagine had a dearth of low-income people in them) that the “No on 165” campaign should focus on the Governor’s “power grab” rather than on the shattering effects the measure would have on low-income families. Thus, one slickly produced campaign brochure shouted on its cover that “A handful of elected officials want to grab control.” Inside the brochure, no mention was made of the proposed welfare cuts and their devastating impact on poor women. While other campaign pieces addressed the welfare cuts, de-emphasizing welfare was the strategy of choice.

Implicit in that decision was a cynical, and I believe misguided, calculation that the general voting public would not be receptive to arguments that welfare recipients are, in fact, deserving poor and are entitled to society’s compassion and respect. The deep cynicism underlying the campaign really hit home for me at a speakers bureau training. I naively asked those planning to storm the portals of newspapers throughout the
state why they had neglected to include low-income women in their ranks, thus depriving the white middle-class men who comprise the vast majority of newspaper editorial boards of the opportunity to hear, firsthand, how this initiative would devastate the lives of thousands of families. The campaign’s media advisor sternly told me that a campaign was not the place to try to educate the public about something as complex and controversial as welfare reform. It was not until I thought it over that I realized how absurd this argument really was. After all, with thousands of dollars being poured into this campaign by unions and other heavyweights, what better time was there to undertake a massive public education effort?

To add insult to injury, the media advisor added that the most successful strategy with these conservative newspapers would be to send in influential white men who would be better able to talk to the newspaper moguls on their own level and in an articulate way. I strongly disagreed with his strategy on two counts. First, I felt that welfare recipients who would be personally devastated by the initiative would surely deliver the most heartfelt and convincing arguments one could hope for. Second, I highly resented the implicit assumption that women who happen to be on welfare could not articulately discuss the complex policy issues raised by this initiative.

He seemed to take my objections seriously, so I approached him afterward, gave him my name and phone number, and told him that as a former welfare recipient I would be very interested in speaking to newspapers about the real human costs of this initiative. I also urged him to include at least one current welfare recipient in each meeting with editorial boards. He nodded his head, shook my hand, thanked me for my ideas . . . and never called. To my knowledge he never called any of the other women whose names I gave him.

Ironically, this exclusive strategy did not pay off, since many of California’s major newspapers came out in support of Wilson’s initiative. An editorial in the San Francisco Chronicle, all too typical in its display of ignorance and misplaced hostility, lamented the “unfairly heavy fiscal drain” caused by welfare payments, and applauded Wilson’s plan to force recipients “back into the free market as productive members of society.”27 I submit that if a strong-willed, down-to-earth welfare recipient had been in the room during those meetings with newspaper editors, the editorial writers would have been far less inclined to spew out such inane drivel.

Proposition 165 was a bold and shameless effort by a powerful man, representing the interests of other powerful people in this state, to inflict great harm on less powerful, low-income women who have been rele-

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PROPOSITION 165

gated to the margins of our society. Whether intentionally or not, the “No on 165” campaign ironically perpetuated this power dynamic. Campaign strategists consciously chose to downplay the initiative’s devastating effect on low-income women, and then compounded this insult by systematically excluding these women from assuming equal partnership in the campaign. When you strip away all of the good intentions and politically correct rhetoric surrounding the “No on 165” campaign, you find that the people who thought of themselves as the good guys in this effort were, more often than not, unconsciously perpetuating the very system and circumstances that continue to keep low-income women in a position of passive resignation, with no power and precious little hope.

This is not to say that low-income women had no role in the campaign. At the grass-roots level, there was much to celebrate. Poor women and their advocates worked side by side, mobilizing their communities. As far as I know, the official “No on 165” campaign approved of and sometimes actively supported these efforts. Nevertheless, approval differs from placing low-income women at the forefront of all efforts to defeat the initiative. Imagine how much more powerful the campaign would have been if, instead of pouring all that money into slick television advertisements, we had rented two hundred buses and joined with local organizers to bring five thousand irate welfare mothers into Governor Wilson’s office in Sacramento. What if we had made it a priority to provide logistical and legal support to welfare recipients who chained themselves together across the Bay Bridge and declared they were not going to move until they got the chance to present their side of the story on the TV news? Proposition 165 provided us with a unique opportunity to organize low-income women around a dramatic issue of searing immediacy but, in the end, excluded the very people we purportedly were trying to help.

A NEW THREAT

It now appears that Governor Wilson has decided to give us another chance to do it right. As he threatened to do when Proposition 165 was defeated, he is now trying to use the state budget process to pass the same welfare cuts and restrictions that the voters rejected at the ballot box last fall.

In the 1993-94 state budget unveiled on January 9, Wilson proposed to immediately cut welfare by 4.2%, with a further 15% reduction after six months (sound familiar?). He also included all the same punitive restrictions found in Proposition 165. This time, he went even further. He proposed to eliminate “optional” Medi-Cal programs such as dental benefits, and suggested totally eliminating the renter’s credit, which bene-
fits low-income people who cannot afford to buy a home and therefore do not receive the public assistance homeowners are granted in the form of mortgage interest tax deductions. To make matters worse, Wilson simultaneously proposed to take away $2.6 billion from local government. Ironically, at the same time he suggested these devastating cutbacks, Wilson had the temerity to propose pouring millions of additional dollars into bogus fraud detection programs, including mandatory fingerprinting of all welfare recipients—a scheme, I suppose, to catch all those welfare queens who are riding around in Cadillacs and single-handedly causing the state budget deficit to grow. Perhaps Wilson's master plan to provide affordable housing in this state is to cut welfare payments until poor women are forced to beg and steal to feed their children and then to arrest them and throw them all in jail. Wilson has been pouring millions of dollars into building new jail cells lately.

Although the budget process was not completed by the time this article went to press, given the worsening state budget crisis and the continued lack of public sympathy for welfare recipients, I fully expect that the legislature will implement most of the punitive measures that have been cloaked in the rhetoric of reform. Even before Proposition 165 went to a popular vote in 1992, the California legislature passed some of the measure's proposals, such as the welfare cuts and the restrictions on benefits to new state residents. Wilson has threatened to put another welfare initiative on the ballot in 1994 if his proposals are not adopted by the legislature this year.

WHAT IS REAL WELFARE REFORM?

By all accounts, the welfare system as currently constituted is an utter failure. For too long, poor women and their advocates have allowed this country's conservatives to set the agenda and define the terms. We have not advanced our own strong vision for change. Things have become so skewed that, at the end of the bruising state budget battle in 1992, liberal legislators bragged that they had successfully held welfare cutbacks to "only" 5.8%. Low-income mothers suddenly forced to live at an even lower level of poverty were unable to share in their satisfaction.

Before discussing what changes in the system would actually provide low-income women with a realistic hope of financial independence, it is necessary to take a look at what welfare reform is not.

First, welfare reform is not cutting welfare benefits to "force" lazy recipients back into the job market. Contrary to Governor Wilson's snide remark about welfare payments being used for Cadillacs and six-packs, life on welfare is no picnic. I have yet to meet a woman who thinks she is getting a great deal. Taking a simplistic and short-sighted
view of the problem is a time-honored American tradition, but in this case it is not going to work, and refusing to recognize this will result in human suffering.

Moreover, welfare reform is not weakly planned enterprises such as California’s GAIN (Greater Avenues to Independence) program, which imposes further conditions on the receipt of welfare benefits. When GAIN, California’s carrot-and-stick answer to workfare, was established to bipartisan cheers several years ago, supporters touted it as a tough-but-tender approach that would give welfare recipients the education and job training they need to achieve long-term independence from welfare. The reality, unsurprisingly, has turned out to be quite different. Although most AFDC recipients are required to participate in GAIN, the program was funded at such low levels that even those women who want to take part in the program are relegated to long waiting lists. When I went to my caseworker about a year after GAIN was established to see if it could help me finish my college education, she shook her head and told me that the program had to give first priority to those welfare recipients who were deemed least likely to volunteer, based on long histories of welfare receipt or other factors. So much for the system rewarding ambition and initiative, I thought to myself. Of course, GAIN’s failure is usually attributed to the fact that it was too “soft” on welfare recipients, rather than the fact that grown men (and a few women) have neglected to keep their funding promises.

So what reform is needed?

Just this: a major overhaul of our social safety net, so that all members of our society are assured a livable income. It is time to stop tinkering with the current welfare system and time to put a system in place that actually helps low-income women achieve true financial security. The most effective way to foster women’s financial independence is to create adequate-paying jobs and then support women’s efforts to receive the education, training, child care, and other services they need in order to succeed in these jobs. Access to affordable health care is also critical, as is better enforcement of child support payments and public policies that help, rather than hinder, families’ efforts to stay together.

A study by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research found that the best way to help poor women permanently escape poverty is to enable them to supplement their paychecks with welfare benefits as necessary, rather than adhering to the “all-or-nothing” mentality currently displayed in most of the current reform efforts.28 This finding only underscores what most poor women know intuitively: that most welfare recipients want to work but that the low-paying jobs prevalent in today’s job market do not pay enough to pull a family out of poverty.

People get entangled in the current welfare system and even services established to disentangle welfare recipients from the system are ineffective. The entire time I was on welfare, I never even knew about the existence of Legal Aid; consequently, any time I had a problem with my benefits, I would call upon my inbred middle-class sense of entitlement, march into my caseworker's office, and demand to know just what she was going to do to solve the problem. During the endless hours I spent passing the time with other recipients in the crowded welfare waiting room, I suggested to anyone being treated unfairly that they employ the same strategy. On one or two satisfying occasions, I was able to convince several women who shared similar problems to approach the receptionist's window en masse, demanding that a supervisor come down to talk to us together about what could be done to resolve the issue. My instincts told me that we, acting as a noisy, rule-breaking bunch of women, would get a far speedier resolution than if we meekly waited our turns as individuals—and these instincts proved to be right.

When I came to work in the world of legal services a few years later, I was surprised to learn that the standard method of providing legal advice and representation to low-income women was the same model used by private attorneys and the welfare system itself, namely one-on-one representation to seek resolution of "individual" problems. How odd, I thought, that these advocates are actually perpetuating the isolation of low-income women rather than bringing them together to support each other and to share ideas. By addressing their clients' legal problems one by one, these attorneys are inadvertently reinforcing the twisted cult of individualism in this society. As with the well-intentioned but ultimately disempowering strategies used in the "No on 165" campaign, this is another important reminder that when it comes to helping the disenfranchised in this society, the means are just as important as the ends.

What we should be doing is helping welfare recipients recognize that, by and large, it is the system that has failed, not them as individuals. By providing legal advice and other technical assistance, we could encourage and support the efforts of low-income women to organize themselves and lead the fight for institutional change. I strongly believe that it is both morally imperative and good common sense to make sure that low-income women assume center stage in any reform effort. In such a scenario, the appropriate role of poverty lawyers is substantially different from the current model. Rather than perpetuating the have/have-not division by doling out legal information on a "need-to-know" basis, attorneys should primarily serve as technical assistants, helping low-income women use the law effectively as one of many tools to bring about fundamental social change. Although this would involve attorneys' relinquishing power and control, I believe that, under this system, attorneys would be much more inspired and less vulnerable to burn-out.
Instead of spending all their energy in an exhausting struggle to hold ground in a totally inadequate welfare system, attorneys would work hand-in-hand with low-income women to get to the root of the problem, collectively bringing about a fundamental shift of power in our society.

I recognize that attorneys whose employers receive funds from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) are severely restricted in their ability to organize low-income women. To me, this suggests not that these attorneys should merely shake their heads with regret and go back to their individual case work but, rather, that they should throw their considerable energy into two efforts. First, they should work to change the absurd LSC regulations that prohibit such involvement. Second, they should find creative and useful ways to support low-income women in their own organizing efforts. On a larger scale, if each financially secure woman in California gave just $10 a month to support low-income women's organizing efforts, we could finally go about our work the way we think is best, with low-income women leading the charge and attorneys providing technical support as needed.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WELFARE REFORM

If I had to come up with my own plan for reforming the welfare system, some of the steps I would propose might at first glance seem to have nothing at all to do with welfare; but, rest assured, all of the following suggestions are integral to the struggle of low-income women to achieve financial self-sufficiency. In reforming the welfare system, I would:

1. Increase the Earned Income Tax Credit, the renter's credit, and other tax-based support for low-income families.
2. Set a higher need standard for welfare eligibility.
3. Establish "fill-the-gap" programs that support, rather than penalize, the efforts of welfare recipients to improve their financial situations by taking paid jobs.
4. Raise the minimum wage so that a person working full-time is well above the poverty level, and index the minimum wage to inflation.
5. Expand enforcement of child support orders, and not deduct these payments from recipients' welfare checks.
6. Improve the health care system so it will provide affordable coverage for lower income families, so that no parent has to choose between health insurance and a job when trying to leave welfare. Provide free access to quality prenatal and maternity care.
7. Establish a nationwide system of affordable, quality child care.
8. Increase housing subsidies, mortgage assistance programs, and other mechanisms for low-income families to find safe and affordable shelter.
9. Increase the availability of affordable education and job training that prepares individuals for meaningful and necessary jobs.

These are lofty goals, and they involve serious challenges to some
entrenched interests. However, we can do nothing less if we truly hope to alleviate the burgeoning caste system in this society. Achieving such ambitious goals will require a massive and concerted effort by progressives, working together across race and class lines. The draconian “reform” proposals currently in vogue disproportionately affect women. Therefore, I urge all women’s groups to make this work their top priority. I am encouraged to see that the National Organization for Women and other mainstream groups have finally begun to move in this direction during the last few years, but time is of the essence. We have got to work together as one massive voice for change if we want to curtail this frightening trend of using society’s most vulnerable members as scapegoats.

As bleak as things may seem, I believe that Californians are increasingly beginning to see through the false “us vs. them” dichotomy. As the recession lingers, the conceptual chasm between the undeserving poor and the vaunting middle-class will be revealed as a thin line at best. It will become much more difficult for supposedly invincible, proud middle-class workers to deny that the only thing between them and the despised welfare recipient is just a lay-off, a factory shut-down, a divorce, or a major illness. Nationwide, one in ten Americans now receives food stamps, and one in seven children lives in a household that receives AFDC. The defeat of Proposition 165 suggests that recognition of this harsh economic reality may finally be taking place. On the other hand, Proposition 165’s slim eight-point margin of victory cannot be called an outpouring of support for welfare recipients. One could argue that the margin of victory would have been much wider if low-income women had been given the opportunity to publicly present their side of the story in a more forceful way.

Women of all income levels bring a different and much-needed perspective to the struggle for social and economic justice. In communities large and small throughout our society, women more often than not are the backbone, the sinew, the blood and bone and breath of their communities. Whereas the male-devised dominant culture all too often rewards selfishness and greed, the alternative model that many women practice in their everyday roles is one of sustaining and collaborating, of working for tomorrow instead of just today.

CONCLUSION

And what am I doing? Well, I am trying to do a lot of things—some big, some small. I work with several groups that address these issues, and I am trying to get a coalition of low-income women up and running in my own community. I talk to my daughter a lot about what

welfare is like and the inequities that lead to it. I think one of the most valuable things I can do to support the movement is to "out" myself as a former welfare recipient on every possible occasion, both to challenge people's stereotypes and to send a message to other low-income women that they are not alone and that there is hope for change, provided we all work together. If you are a welfare recipient, I urge you to practice this "self-outing" on a regular basis. Even if you are not, take care that you accord welfare recipients the same respect you would give to anyone else, and do all that you can to support and assist the growing number of low-income women who are starting to advocate for themselves when it comes to fundamental social change. You owe them, and yourself, nothing less.

**HOW TO GET INVOLVED**

Whether you are a student, professor, activist, welfare recipient, or some combination of the above, I urge you to make a commitment right now to tackling these issues in concert with other women, striving for a diversity of perspectives and life experiences even as you search for the issues you share in common. We may not hold the keys to the kingdom yet, but years of shared oppression have sure taught us how to network and build coalitions. Listed below are just a few of the many groups in California that are doing creative work on these issues. Call them up and ask what you can do to help.

* Women's Economic Agenda Project (WEAP) is a statewide nonprofit group based in Oakland, California. WEAP has had phenomenal success in organizing low-income women and working in coalition with other groups to bring about change. Contact them at 518 Seventeenth Street, Suite 200, Oakland, CA 94612; (510) 451-7479.

* The Income Rights Project organizes low-income women and also provides individual legal advocacy as needed. Contact them at 225 Valencia Street, San Francisco, CA 94103; (415) 252-0704.

* Campaign for a Fair Share was the driving force behind the "No on 165" campaign, and since then has worked to keep advocates connected through meetings and newsletters. Contact them at 915 "L" Street, Suite C, #111, Sacramento, CA 95814; (916) 449-9655.

* If you are a low-income woman and/or a community activist, the Western Center on Law and Poverty is a great resource to turn to for legal advice and support. They have two offices: 3535 W. Sixth Street, Los Angeles, CA 90020; (916) 442-0753; and 2000 "O" Street, Sacramento, CA 95814; (213) 487-7211.

* If you are more interested in policy work, the California Tax Reform Association is worth looking into. CTRA was the main
sponsor of Proposition 167, a “Tax the Rich” proposal. Contact them at 926 “J” Street, Suite 710, Sacramento, CA 95814; (916) 446-4300.

- The Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations is a statewide, nonprofit coalition of the various welfare recipient groups from throughout the state. It also serves as a support center for legal services attorneys and other anti-poverty advocates. Contact them at 1900 “K” Street, Suite 203, Sacramento, CA 95814; (800) 445-7575.

- The Economic Rights Task Force of the National Lawyers Guild is a working group of attorneys, legal workers and others who are interested in providing support to those working in the front lines of the reform effort. Monthly meetings provide an opportunity to network and exchange ideas. Contact Riva Enteen at (415) 285-1055.

- At the national level, the Poverty & Race Research Action Council is a new organization that was established to link more effectively anti-poverty research and front-line advocacy work. They provide research grants of up to $10,000. If you are a law student or professor who is doing academic work around these issues, or an activist who needs some good theoretical groundwork to frame her field work, contact PRRAC, 1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 714, Washington, DC 20009; (202) 387-9887.