Social Welfare: Women & Gender Issues

**Topic:** Women/Gender Issues & Social Welfare

**Keywords:** Social welfare, single mothers, means-tested aid, TANF, welfare state, feminization of poverty

**Description:** The intersection of gender and social welfare in the United States can be primarily understood through policies that affect single mothers, and because single mothers are so disproportionately impoverished (including incredibly low incomes, rates of healthcare, and higher education completion) social welfare programs critically affect them in outsized ways. The incommensurate effects on this vulnerable group make the welfare policy discussion inherently gendered, even when it does not appear to be, and the shockingly low living standards of single mothers in the US point to need for significant reform in our welfare programs.

**Key Points:**

- The vast majority of single parent families in the United States are single mother families and these families are disproportionately welfare dependent. Indeed, 44.3% of female-headed families with children are living in poverty according to the US Bureau of Census.

- Single mother families struggle with incredibly high rates of poverty (39.6%) and low rates of healthcare (22% without health insurance) as well as other disproportionately low living standards in categories such as access to higher education.
• A significant reason for this is that single mothers spend a huge portion of their incomes on housing and childcare (50% on average). Similarly, women on welfare are more likely to have a child with a disability or emotional problem, for which they are given little support.

• Welfare for women in the United States is primarily represented by TANF or “Temporary Assistance to Needy Families”, which emphasizes short term aid that is only awarded to families working a certain number of hours weekly.

• Welfare programs like TANF for this reason discriminate against single mothers who must work the same number of hours as a two-parent family to get benefits for their children. Indeed PRWORA, the legislation that governs TANF, has an explicit goal of reducing out of wedlock pregnancies.

**Issue Brief:**

The intersection of women’s issues and social welfare can primarily be understood through policies that affect single mothers, who are disproportionately welfare dependent because of their extremely high rates of poverty (Gellman). First, we can define social welfare in the United States as public services, including spending on healthcare, education and transfer payments to aid the impoverished and disadvantaged. The most applicable welfare policy to single mothers is TANF or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, passed by Bill Clinton in 1996 as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) (Bryant, 8). The passage of PRWORA, which replaced Lyndon Johnson’s AFDC, marked a distinctly restrictive turn in US welfare spending, TANF has two major requirements: the first is that one cannot be on TANF for more than five years in her adult lifetime and the second is that people on TANF must work at least thirty hours a week or lose their benefits (Bryant, 9).
The policies of TANF and PRWORA do a remarkably poor job of helping single mothers (this is in fact intentional, as one of the four key goals of PRWORA was to “prevent and reduce the incidence of out of wedlock pregnancies” (Bryant, 8)). TANF’s policy of requiring 30 hours of work per week greatly benefits two parent households who can more effectively split the work (CBPP). A married family can have a husband work while the wife takes care of the children and TANF near explicitly aims to promote this kind of behavior. Further, mothers who would like to escape welfare are crippled by the lack of education opportunities in TANF, a two parent household can one person work while the other goes to school, a single parent household certainly cannot. Indeed, such policies promote a cycle of welfare for single mothers, despite TANF’s ostensible goal of getting people working, the program in fact “excludes, by design, large numbers of (women)” because of considerably lower wages for women and the inability of groups like single mothers to obtain higher education leading to much above minimum wage jobs (Gellman).

Indeed the outcomes of being a single mother in the United States speak to the way our welfare system struggles with issues of gender. 44.3% of female-headed families with children in the United States live in poverty (Gellman), accounting for nearly 35% of the impoverished population (Gellman). This is in large part a result of the fact that 83% of single parent families in the United States are single mother families. Single mother families have a median income of $26,000 annually, compared to $83,000 for two parent households and near the federal poverty line for a family of four. Indeed, 39.6% of single mother households are poor and 51.9% of those live in extreme poverty. Of those in extreme poverty 35% face food insecurity, 45% receive food stamps and 22% do not have health insurance (SMG). Indeed poor women struggle with significant discrepancies in health outcomes, almost 40 percent of long-term TANF recipients
(predominantly women) reported “very poor” health and face a rate three times greater than non-TANF recipients of physical or mental health impairment (Kaiser, 2). Women on TANF are also more likely to be victims of domestic abuse, with high end estimates stating that 40% of welfare dependent women have suffered domestic abuse in their lives (Kaiser, 3).

None of these outcomes are for a lack of working: only 23% of single mothers are jobless the entire year and only 22% receive unemployment benefits. Yet as discussed before, women suffer from wage gaps of 78 cents to the dollar (SMG) and institutional structures that promote male education and work. Indeed most statistics indicate that single mothers are working tremendously hard but face a spiraling cycle of welfare dependence and poverty: single mothers spend nearly 50% of their income on housing and childcare (SMG). Many single mothers find themselves with a full time job, yet still living in a state of poverty (Gellman).

It is perhaps obvious by this point that women face unique barriers in dealing with poverty than men do, and that our welfare programs do not account for these barriers, as made obvious by the aforementioned statistics and shockingly low living standards they connect to. Unexpected pregnancies and divorces often leave women as single mothers who face significant challenges in navigating modern society. When talking about issues of social welfare therefore, one could argue it is almost inherently a gendered discussion, as men without children are more mobile and can find work and education more easily. Conversations about apathy with regard to the welfare dependent population tend to ignore the significant challenges that are imposed on a single mother and the way that government programs may be necessary to mitigate such difficulties, which are distinct from the challenges that men face most of the time.
Images:

Poverty rates by sex and age


Women in poverty: family composition of household

Relevant Websites:


http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/programs/tanf

http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/us_welfare_spending_40.html

https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p70-141.pdf


http://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-an-introduction-to-tanf
Works Cited


