Gend. Issues (2008) 25:101–113
DOI 10.1007/s12147-008-9055-7

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Understanding the Complexity of Attitudes of Low-Income Single Mothers Toward Work and Family in the Age of Welfare Reform

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Published online: 13 August 2008

Abstract This article explores the ideas of low-income single mothers on certain aspects of welfare reform, namely the Marriage Promotion Act, which uses funds for the formation and maintenance of two parent families. Drawing on research with former and current welfare recipients, the author explores how the mothers felt about certain welfare reform policies while trying to understand their current work and family arrangements. Two main ideas behind welfare reform were to encourage paid work and two parent families. While the mothers acknowledged that having access to a second wage earner would help themselves and their children realize a life less complicated by monetary issues, they expressed anger and frustration at being encouraged to marry. Welfare reform dictates that families receiving assistance take personal responsibility for their low-income lives and that paid work is essential to moving a family out of poverty. The stories from the mothers interviewed for this study suggest that while they valued work and wanted to work, to combine work with being a "good mother" was difficult to accomplish. Ultimately, what these mothers suggest through their experiences is the contradiction of welfare reform—paid work does not necessarily provide independence and marriage to another wage earner also undermines independence.

Keywords Women · Welfare · Poverty · Motherhood

Introduction

> It's funny that low-income women or women living in poverty can stay at home and be a bad role model, but a middle class mother or wealthy mother is not a bad role model when they stay home. It's like America has two standards

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and it's based on class. Why can't a mother who lives in poverty have the same things as a middle-class mother?

Roberta is a 50 year old African-American mother of three children who spoke most poignantly about the struggles of low-income mothers particularly in reference to the changes in welfare, namely the change from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF—which no longer permits poor families to receive assistance while staying home with children. Because many welfare recipients are single mothers with children (90% in fiscal year 2001 according to the US Department of Health and Human Services) [11], with the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), Congress essentially ended single mothers' entitlement to income support by emphasizing paid employment. The PRWORA was reauthorized in 2003 with the passage of the Personal Responsibility, Work, and Family Promotion Act. Through this reauthorization and the passage of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA), funding would be spent to "encourage the formation and maintenance of healthy two parent married families." The DRA proposed spending $100 million per year for 5 years to fund healthy marriage promotion efforts.

Using rhetoric of "independence and self-sufficiency," supporters of welfare reform argued that it was in the best interest of both mothers and their children that single mothers work for wages rather than continue to be dependent on state support. Supporters of welfare reform also applauded the funding around marriage promotion, given that among other reasons, single motherhood has been cited as the cause of many social ills. Advocating for independence and self-sufficiency through working for wages, yet encouraging marriage seems contradictory. On the one hand, there is the attitude toward work that provides independence and self-sufficiency, goals which would not require the income of a second wage earner. Yet, the marriage promotion goal clearly identifies the necessity of a second wage earner, implicitly male. In her book, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform*, Sharon Hays [7] labels these goals as the Work Plan and the Family Plan, representing two distinct and contradictory ideals and expectations of welfare recipients. The Work Plan "follows the logic of classical liberal individualism" whereby both men and women compete in the marketplace, work toward self-sufficiency, and utilize "market-based solutions to the caring for children" ([7], p. 19). The Family Plan on the other hand, tends to rely on the "ideal" family image of a stay at home mother and breadwinner husband. Roberta understood these contradictory plans of welfare as she was remarking on her own struggles to combine both paid work and caretaking—struggles complicated by her race, class, and gendered locations.

The purpose of this study is to explore how a certain group of low-income single mothers experienced working for wages and caring for their families in the context of the Work Plan and the Family Plan. How do these women understand motherhood? How do they understand the values of work and the value of taking care of children? The results of this study will add to the existing literature that provides us with the voices of single mothers housed in the debate about welfare.

Working for Wages and Caretaking

The Family Plan aspect of welfare relies on a model where the mother is the primary caretaker of the family. It can be linked to what Hays [6] calls "intensive mothering." Intensive mothering involves viewing the mother as the primary caretaker of children, while expecting her to spend large amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child. Intensive mothering also involves not classifying mothering as work, and if a mother is working outside of the home, her caretaking responsibilities (presumably done only from altruism and love) and paid work activities should be kept separate. Hays [6] argues that this type of mothering became the popular ideal during the nineteenth century and has continued as an ideal type through today. Yet, this type of mothering has been and still is race and class biased. Working class women and many immigrant, African-American, and Hispanic women have not always been able to participate in this type of mothering, although they have been aware of its tenets.

According to various scholars including Patricia Hill Collins and Denise Segura, African-American women and Latina women have often combined working for wages with caretaking responsibilities. Collins ([2], p. 184) argues, "In contrast to the cult of true womanhood associated with the traditional family ideal, in which paid work is defined as being in opposition and incompatible with motherhood, work for black women has been an important and valued dimension of motherhood." As Collins [2] argues, various forms of racial discrimination often prevent African-American women from participating in intensive mothering.

Culture and ethnicity also play a role in the acceptance of intensive mothering. In her research on mothering and working for wages among Chicanas (US born) and Mexican immigrant women, Segura [10] found different ideas among them. "Mexicanas, raised in a world where economic and household work often merged, do not dichotomize social life into public/private spheres but appear to view employment as one workable domain of motherhood" ([10], p. 183). Chicanas, on the other hand, adhered more to the ideology of stay-at-home motherhood and expressed more ambivalence to paid employment. Further, Chicana women who were raised by other female family members, not their biological mothers, did not want to leave their children with other caretakers because it contradicted their conceptualization of motherhood [10]. This literature indicates that low-income single mothers hold complex views of motherhood, views that are shaped not only by their upbringing and their cultural, racial, and class identities, but also by their locations within the larger social structure.

The complexity of ideas surrounding motherhood and working for wages is not addressed by welfare policies touting the Work Plan and the Family Plan. Although the Family Plan espouses ideals of intensive mothering, the Work Plan contradicts these ideals. If a single mother is working outside of the home for wages, she must rely on others to help her with her caretaking responsibilities. She cannot therefore be the primary caretaker of her children spending large amounts of time, money, and energy on them. Ajay Chaudry, set out to answer the question of how single mothers can provide quality care for their children in his book, *Putting Children First: How Low-Wage Working Mothers Manage Child Care*. Chaudry [1] finds that

the changes in welfare that emphasized the mothers' work behavior rather than the caring of her children led to the struggles of the women he studied. They struggled not only to fulfill their role as a wage earner, but also as a parent. The number of different and often low quality childcare arrangements these low-wage earning mothers needed to make often made them question their capabilities to parent.

Being low-income, a single parent, and dealing with welfare requirements and restrictions create challenges in managing paid work activities and caretaking responsibilities. Work/life balance is a struggle for families across race and class lines. But, when welfare requirements present two rather contradictory messages on how to live one's life, the struggle is intensified. How can we come to understand the needs of the mothers who are raising children and working outside of the home and relying on different types of assistance? What do they do in their everyday lives to manage these responsibilities and what are their emotional responses?

Research Method

There is a continuing need for scholarship in the area of welfare studies to understand the daily struggles of poor, single mothers. While quantitative studies are important in providing much needed objective and generalizable descriptions of data, qualitative studies like this one attempt to provide an in-depth look at the lived experiences of these single mothers.

The data for this study come from semi-structured interviews conducted with twelve low-income single mothers in Portland, Oregon. Participants in this study were recruited through flyers posted in welfare offices, a women's health clinic serving poor women, in university and community college-affiliated day care centers, and through a small welfare rights organization. Several criteria were used in choosing participants for this study. In order to determine the mothers low-income, I used the Economic Policy Institute's (EPI) Basic Family Budget Calculator (BFBC) which measures a realistic income needed to provide food, shelter, transportation, and other essentials for a family living in 21st century America [3]. I further chose respondents who were not currently married, had at least one child, and had some past or current receipt of either federal or state assistance.

The mothers ranged in the ages of 21–53, had one to three children, and had various educational and racial/ethnic backgrounds. The type of, duration, and current receipt of assistance also varied among the women. (See Table 1 for a summary of descriptive information.)

Through the analysis of the rich interview material, I sought to understand the complexity of the lives of these single mothers, in particular their views on the federal funding for marriage promotion and how they actually balanced their working and mothering lives.

Discussion and Conclusion

Similar to other studies on work/family balances, these low-income single mothers struggled with their abilities to adequately meet the needs of their children because

Table 1 Summary of descriptive information

Name	Age	Number of children and ages of children	History of assistance/type of assistance	Education	Race/ethnicity
Angela	39	Two: 16 and 18	Received AFDC and food stamps	Bachelors degree	African-American
Anna	41	Two: 13 and 16	On and off AFDC, food stamps, OHP[a], subsidized child care	Currently attending community college	Caucasian
Darlene	31	One: 14	Currently receiving TANF, food stamps, subsidized housing, and OHP	Currently attending community college	African-American
Florence	53	Three: 30, 32, and 39	Received AFDC and food stamps	Some college	African-American
Jenny	29	One: 10	On and off AFDC, food stamps, OHP, subsidized child care	Bachelors degree	Caucasian
Joy	22	One: 10½ months	Currently receiving TANF, food stamps, OHP	GED	Caucasian
Julia	21	Two: 2 and 6	Received TANF, currently receiving food stamps, subsidized childcare, subsidized housing, and OHP	High school	Hispanic
Mary	26	One: 3	Currently receiving WIC, employment related daycare, and OHP	Currently attending 4 year university	Caucasian
Patti	24	Three: 1, 2, and 3	Received TANF, currently receiving food stamps, subsidized childcare, and OHP	GED	Caucasian
Roberta	50	Three: 17, 28, and 30	Received AFDC and food stamps	Bachelors degree	African-American
Sherry	42	Two: 7 and 18	Currently receiving TANF, subsidized childcare, food stamps, and OHP	High school	Caucasian
Stephanie	27	One: 4	Currently receiving food stamps and OHP	Currently attending 4 year university	Caucasian

[a] OHP stands for the Oregon Health Plan—free or low-cost health care coverage for Oregon residents with limited income

of their paid work responsibilities. The single mothers in this study have similar experiences to those documented in other research by Edin and Lein [4], Edin and Kefalas [5], Hays [7], and Chaudry [1]. What I found interesting and hope to convey from the experiences of women in this study is the complexity of their emotional responses to issues around the Work and Family Plans of welfare put forth by Hays [7]. "Wouldn't that Prince Charming dream be nice once in awhile," says Patti, about being able to be a stay-at-home mother while a stable male, breadwinner takes care of the financial responsibilities. Yet, as she spoke about taking care of children as a single mother, she asserted how proud she was of herself and her abilities to manage caretaking and working as a Certified Nursing Assistant. Understanding this complexity from the women in this study as couched in terms of the Work Plan and the Family Plan, while also understanding the structural constraints they faced based on race and class, leads to the following conclusions.

Balancing Working for Wages and Mothering

All of the mothers in this study expressed conflicting emotions regarding the physical and emotional work it required to take care of children. They, of course, loved their children, but expressed doubt and frustration with their motherhood roles as exasperated by their race and class locations. The women in this study advocated that working for wages and childcare could be successfully accomplished if they had the right kind of job and if their motherhood role was valued. Race was identified as a barrier to finding decent employment and as a way to have the role of mother be devalued. Roberta, Angela, and Florence all identified race as prohibiting them from being the mothers they aimed to be. For example, Angela felt that she was a "mediocre mother." She says,

> I've had to do motherhood in a hostile environment and that pisses me off. And sometimes when you're angry, you don't make the best choices. So, you know, say the environment was conducive to motherhood, then I would probably feel differently. I don't like having to choose between if my child can play sports or if we're going to eat.

Angela is speaking of an environment that is much more unforgiving of women of color for not making the "best choices" about mothering. The environment of which Angela speaks is a racist welfare system and a broader social environment that devalues the roles of African-American and poor mothers. She says, "Based on who I am in this society, which is black and female, these two often mean economic deprivation." According to Angela, raising children in poverty exacerbates the problems of the racism she experienced as an African-American, single mother.

Roberta and Florence felt that not only is the role of mother not valued for African-American women, but that the tenets of "intensive mothering" have never applied to women of color. These women argued that the expectations for African-American women were to be workers first, mothers second. Roberta elaborates on this concept of African-American motherhood,

> Because the uniqueness of African-American women is our slave history, of us being enslaved and we came to this country to be laborers or workers. And when slavery ended, that same perception stayed with us, that black women were not viewed as or perceived as being mothers, wives. That's the perception of black women after slavery. Motherhood and womanhood are not two words that we associate with black women.

Roberta further states about stay-at-home motherhood, "As a black woman, this has never been a choice. I think this is one of the issues that has been the line between black feminism and white feminism. Society has not been supportive of black women to stay at home to take care of their children no matter what their income is." Yet, as Florence indicates, even though stay-at-home motherhood was not an option for African-American women, they could still be looked at as good mothers. Florence's mother worked outside of the home, and she says, "it probably wasn't because she wanted to, but because she had to, but she always said to us and she had three daughters, was you got your own mud, you can do your own dopping, so that's always been important to me and it's what I have passed on to my daughters and my granddaughters." As Florence indicates, even though her mother worked, she was independent and passed this along to her, thus successfully being a worker, but being a good mother who passed along sage advice. Roberta emphasizes that race is a determining factor in how others portray the African-American mothers and as Angela described, how others portray African-American women affected her ability to mother.

The majority of women in this study felt that mothering was not the only activity they wanted to do, but working for wages had to take on certain characteristics. Stephanie wondered what else a single mother would be doing if she was not working outside of the home, but in order to be happy and fulfilled, a job would only be beneficial to a working mother "if you were doing what you loved, not doing something you hate." Jenny indicated that working would allow her to get away from her son because, "I couldn't be around my kid all the time." Yet, she also notes,

> I think it's good to be home with kids. Kids who do not see their parents, they just don't have the opportunity to really develop as a stable, healthy person and you know, especially, if you are working after they get home from school and you are struggling to even spend time with them. Like my friend, she works a part-time job, she works from 3 to 7. She doesn't see her daughter until 7:30 at night and then, sometimes she has to work weekends and that's the job that is available to her right now. And she's looked for plenty of other jobs.

Jenny is speaking of the benefit of paid work as a way for parents to have a separate life and identity outside of parenthood but she clarified to me that working for wages becomes unhealthy if it stretches past full time and becomes too demanding that a parent cannot successfully manage both caretaking and working.

Julia found a job in the social services sector with help from her caseworker. Julia's employer was accepting of her single motherhood status and allowed her some flexibility in terms of hours. Yet, with Julia only working 32 hours a week instead of 40, she did not receive health insurance and relied upon the Oregon Health Plan to help her with the insurance needs for her and her children. Despite

her flexible working schedule, Julia was still conflicted about whether she wanted to stay home with her children or continue working. She says, "It's not that I want to stay home, but I have little ones and where I'm coming from, it's very important to be there for your kids, at least until they are 7 or 8 when they can go to school. But at the same time, I do have a lot of professional goals. It's hard for me to leave home and not be with my kids. I want to be here and I want to be there." Julia notes that her ideas about staying home to mother come from her Cuban ethnicity and from her mother staying home to care for her and her siblings. She is influenced by the cultural environment of her home country and the ability of her mother, who was also single, to stay home and support her and her siblings. Jenny and Julia both are specifying that as long as paid work is flexible and provides for a positive influence on a parent's livelihood, then working as a single parent can be beneficial.

Joy, Darlene, and Sherry, all of whom were receiving TANF at the time of the study, were not working outside of the home. Although their children were of different ages, Joy's son being 10½ months, Darlene's daughter age 14, and Sherry's sons of 7 and 18, they felt similarly about how hard it was to work and take care of their children. They felt that they were better off receiving welfare even though it was meager because they were able to better monitor their children in the home and be an integral factor in their children's lives. Joy wanted to be home with her child because he was an infant and was previously working a swing shift. She says, "I would say I am better off now than I was then and you know, I would be willing to jump through hoops if [my son] was school age or something and I could send him away 40 hours a week, but I can't do that. He's a baby." Darlene wanted to be home more so that she could monitor the activities of her 14-year old daughter. She says, "Moms shouldn't have to choose whether to go to work or keep their teenage daughter from becoming pregnant." Darlene followed up with me how many friends she knew who were working so much that their teenage children would be left home alone and would either get pregnant or get into drugs. Although her 18-year old son was not living with her, Sherry felt it was important for her to be the stay-at-home mom she wasn't for her first son. She also spoke of being able to be the "neighborhood mom." Because many of the parents in her neighborhood were also parenting on their own and some were involved in drugs, she took pride in providing her home as a space for her son and his friends to hang out. She notes, "I guess methamphetamine was a big thing going through the complex, and some of these children...I love kids and all that and they would come to my house to see [my son] and I would feed them. You would go their house and there would be no food for these children." Sherry also felt it was important to be able to take her son to his activities and watch him participate in them. These women's ideas about paid work were influenced by the ages of their children, but also because of their past experiences with paid employment. They were unable to find jobs like the one Julia had that offered a flexible schedule and a reliable paycheck.

Like Stephanie, Anna also felt that working for wages could be beneficial for the mother and her children if the work was meaningful and paid well. Anna said that volunteering could be just as beneficial to the mother and her children because working in a low wage job is so stressful. She says, "I think working does set a good example for the kids, but maybe not as much as staying home and volunteering and

all that other stuff. Because if you're working, at least if you're low-income, you're so busy working and surviving that you don't consciously do things to help others or your community." Jenny also felt that if more parents had the opportunity to stay home and volunteer, children and communities would be better cared for—there would be less crime and less opportunity for children to get into trouble.

The women in this study had varying attitudes toward paid employment and how to successfully combine it with mothering. Most of the women had at one time or another enjoyed working for wages and understood what it could do for their self-esteem and their livelihoods, if the job allowed them to successfully balance caretaking with it. Their responses complicate the idea behind the Work Plan of welfare; that getting *any* job that gets them off of welfare will be beneficial for themselves and their families. The mothers in this study clearly identify that just because they are working a low-wage job does not mean they enjoy it and if they are not enjoying their work or are constantly stressed about missing out on their mothering, working full time or even part time is a stressor. From some of the respondents, it seemed that being forced to work a low wage job *added* stress they did not have if they were able to pursue other avenues such as staying home and volunteering. They argued that these avenues would allow them to be better mothers; they would be able to pursue activities they enjoyed which would help them better cope with the stresses of everyday life and these activities would give them more time to spend with their families. Establishing a work ethic or valuing work is not the issue for these women. As Anna notes, "it's a privilege to be able to work at the right job, to be able to control which direction your life is going." For many women in this study, their conflict is knowing the value of work, but not being able to feel valuable as contributing members of society or as parents because their low wage work does not provide them with that "valuable" status or enough money to support their children on their own. Poverty and, as the African-American women identified, race limit their choices and receiving welfare further complicates struggles and adds to the emotional complexity involved in combining paid work and mothering.

Access to Another Person's Wage

The Family Plan aspect of welfare complicates the Work Plan. The Family Plan is modeled after a type of intensive mothering where the mother is the primary caretaker of the family, which these women are. However, the Family Plan also implies that the primary caretaker will be financially provided for by a breadwinning partner, which is not what these women have. All of the mothers in this study had to rely on a "complicated combination of care" due to the complex and multiple childcare arrangements needing to be arranged because of their work schedules or because of the unreliability of certain childcare providers. Seccombe notes, "Unlike more affluent mothers who can purchase the services their families may need in light of paid work, poor single mothers have a more difficult time finding the tenuous balance between work and family" ([9], p. 213). Indeed, the women in this study have a more difficult time finding this balance because they have far fewer choices to achieve it than upper income single mothers and mothers

who have access to another person's wage. In regard to access to another wage earner, Kingfisher's [8] quote by Judith Stacey is particularly poignant. "In the emerging class structure, marriage is becoming a major axis of stratification because it structures access to a second income. The married female as a 'secondary' wage earner lifts a former working-class or middle-class family into comparative affluence, while the loss or lack of access to a male income can force women and their children into poverty" (p. 152). The women in this study were certainly aware of this fact. Some of them had been married or attached to another wage earner and then found themselves on their own. These women had experienced a loss of income and were also not being paid any type of child support. Because some of these women had been attached to another wage earner, they did experience a brief time of when they could stay home with their children. So, again, their various experiences led them to the sometimes conflicting conclusions regarding how they were doing as mothers. General responses to how these women felt about being good mothers were, "I'm a mediocre mother," "So, do I feel like a good mom? Absolutely not," and "I always feel like I'm short sticking her." These women understood the value of the economic contributions another wage earner could provide, yet they questioned how good it was for their emotional lives to be connected to someone who was not reliable and not a good father to their children.

Mary was juggling school, work, and being a parent to her 3-year old daughter. She relied on employment related daycare and her mother to help take care of her daughter and worried that she was not spending enough time with her. She told me in tears,

> I really just wish I could feed her brain with knowledge and I was the one instilling the values instead of the school and I mean, you do, but, by the time you get them fed, you dress them in the morning, you have breakfast together, it's like a whole three hours. You know, that's just not a whole lot of quality time.

Patti tells a similar story,

> It killed me that I would come home at night and I would be so tired and the little things you miss because you are wiped out all the time and I have a hard time just enjoying the time I have to spend with them, it's all I can do to get them in the bath and into bed.

Certainly, these responses could come from a working mother who earns a decent income, is married to another wage earner, and relies on others to help care for her children. Parents who work and raise children, despite their income level, face practical dilemmas about the cost, quality, frequency of childcare and emotional dilemmas about childcare. Seccombe [9] argues that upper income women have an easier time purchasing the care of others. Certainly, none of the women in this study could afford a nanny. Often, they relied upon a patchwork of different people in different places to help take care of their children. But, the purchasing of quality care is not the only benefit for upper income women, their childcare arrangements may be more reliable and there is not the constant stress of being able to afford childcare the next month. Many of the women in this study struggled with having to switch daycare providers and the conflict that if they worked more, they could lose

welfare benefits that would help them pay for their childcare. Patti, a Certified Nursing Assistant, says,

> If I worked more than 40 hours a week, then I could get off assistance, but then, where will I be? I would have to quit my job. I could get a job at 7–11 or something, something making minimum wage so that I could go right back in there and get childcare benefits, probably I would receive more childcare benefits than I get now. So, if I worked at McDonald's, I would be doing a lot better than I am now because the state would be helping more. The state paid around $1100 a month to watch my kids for me. That was more than I made at that time. So, the state would rather pay somebody else that much money than me to watch my kids.

Patti elaborates on this problem well documented with welfare recipients. The more a welfare recipient works and the more money she makes, the less benefits she receives. However, the lack of childcare benefits can be devastating when a welfare recipient is not making that much more than what she was making while receiving assistance. I asked about and listened to these struggles identified by the women in this study. I asked them how they felt about the welfare policy of promoting marriage for poor women and whether this would alleviate some of their struggles. The women in this study bristled at the thought of being forced to marry, but some of them did respond that access to another person's wage could be helpful in dealing with caring for their children.

Although some of the women acknowledged that maybe someday they would get married and that may make life easier, all of the women regarded encouraging marriage for poor mothers as severely flawed and as a devaluation of their mothering abilities. The general consensus was that women should not have to rely on a man to be financially secure. Joy says in response to the policy, "That's saying get married or starve. It also implies that women can't take care of themselves, that everything would be okay if they just had a man in their lives." Stephanie resented the fact that women were encouraged to stay married to the fathers, even if they were not very good ones. She says, "I'd rather be the mom and the dad than being the mom and the yucky dad. Dad's not nice. Yeah, well, he sucks, but mom keeps him around because society tells me that will be better. That's just crap." Sherry, having experienced severe domestic violence expressed concerns about having to marry abusive men. Further, Jenny and Roberta argued that it would not help poor single mothers to get married to poor single men. Roberta says, "You want to spend $300 million in the promotion of marriage, but how many low-income families or low-income individuals are going to meet people who are middle-class, who have middle incomes, median incomes or are wealthy or rich?" Roberta also felt that such a policy is also driven by racism because of the large number of African-American female headed households.

Patti and Mary acknowledged that being attached to another wage earner could make life easier. Both Patti and Mary jokingly talked about finding a husband. Mary says laughing, "I just want to find a husband as soon as possible. I'm just kidding. Lately, I have decided that is just what I have to do, is that I have to go after money and screw love. I know that sounds bad, but my personal conflict now is like, as a

woman, do I be independent or how long do I have to struggle." Mary said later that she would feel more independent if she was married, "cause then I would have a life too. I could share some of the responsibility and right now that looks really good." Patti notes, "Wouldn't that Prince Charming dream be nice just once in awhile?" She gives the example of her friend's husband who provides the income so that her friend can do what she wants. Patti says,

> Even though I have come so far, I have a car, I have a house, not just an apartment, and I'm a CNA and I will never have to work a minimum wage job again ever. My kids aren't in want for anything really important, but compared to her, I'm nowhere. I'm at the bottom, you know. Yeah, so she has a lot more choices and a lot more freedom.

Mary, Stephanie, and Patti tended to be the most emotional and conflicted mothers regarding their relationships with men in part because of their ages and the younger ages of their children, but mostly because of their more recent attachments to the fathers of their children. They had much more recently than the other women been separated from their partners. Patti and Mary both having had unreliable partners mention above that if they were to be married, it would be for money. They had emotional investments in the fathers of their children and the fathers ended up deserting them. So it was not so much that they were desiring a "traditional" family, but their desire to share responsibilities, or have someone contribute a reliable income so they would not have to struggle so much.

Although the women in this study were adamantly opposed to marriage promotion for poor women, some had the thought of "wouldn't it be nice..." to have that male breadwinner. Yet, these women vacillated between wanting a breadwinner in their lives and valuing their independence. They were often conflicted about their mothering abilities, but felt they were doing the best jobs possible despite experiencing structural constraints based on their race and class locations.

The women in this study contemplated the idea about what constituted being a successful parent, especially in dealing with their various race and class locations and receiving assistance. They questioned the dichotomy of whether a mother could be a "good mother" if she stays at home with her children and relies on a male breadwinner for financial support, or if she works and supports her children whether on her own or with the help of another breadwinner. What their responses indicate is that the ability to be a good mother is more complicated than this dichotomy, a dichotomy configured in the Family and Work Plans of welfare. The women's responses in this study indicated that many issues need to be addressed in terms of how to best combine mothering and other responsibilities, including what type of employment she has and if and how she receives acceptance of her motherhood role.

Conclusion

The women in this study spoke of the day to day struggles they had in being low-income and raising children. They enlightened us on issues of racism and motherhood, the problems with low-wage work, and the ambiguity and conflict they

felt about the benefits to having a responsible breadwinner to help financially support themselves and their children, but then also valuing their independence and abilities to be single mothers. These mothers were extraordinary women, not only looking out for themselves and their children, but also for their communities. We need to continue to hear the stories from mothers who face these struggles everyday in order to alleviate them. We need to recognize that low-income mothers of all races and ethnicities have a variety of work and family experiences and issues, but nonetheless share similar concerns on how best to meet the financial and emotional needs for themselves and their families. The Family Plan and Work Plan of welfare tend to add to the stress and complexity these women feel about their roles and responsibilities as mothers and as workers.

Acknowledgements The author wishes to thank Bob Bolin (Arizona State University) and Mary Tuominen (Denison University) for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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