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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice
Thought Paper

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Q. 4. What are the obstacles, both in political activism and conceptual representations, to responding effectively to sexual and economic injustice? What keeps activists and scholars from approaching sexual and economic justice as co-constitutive?

I will respond to this provocative question by referring to the issue of welfare reform in the United States. Poverty programs ought to be placed at the top of the feminist agenda. With the feminization of poverty, especially among single women with children, women are highly overrepresented among low-income Americans. Due to the deeply engrained nature of structural racism, this is all the more true for black women and Latinas. Moreover, we segregate needy families headed by single parents within their own poverty program, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF, which replaced Assistance to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC, in 1996). It is, by and large, women who head single parent families; single fathering is relatively rare. The single mothers who have only a high school education are particularly vulnerable to poverty; they typically find only minimum wage jobs, and, given their childcare duties, they often have to settle for part-time, dead-end, temporary, and non-unionized work.

While the federal government does provided a limited amount of aid for the full-time low-income wage earner (think, for example, of the Earned Income Tax Credit program), it leaves even these more highly valued individuals to sort out their own

caregiving arrangements. On the whole, the poor are left to fend for themselves in a harsh low-wage market. Since the 1960s, when the civil rights movement and the poverty rights movement successfully pushed local, state, and federal poverty agencies to admit black families onto the rolls in significant numbers for the first time in the nation's history, we have seen a highly racialized and misogynist backlash against needy mothers. Led by a bipartisan bloc of political forces that includes mainstream feminists, this backlash against the so-called "welfare queen" has attracted enthusiastic support from the mass public.

Compared to other OECD countries, we come dead last on subsidized childcare. We have extraordinarily high poverty indicators: in 2002, 12.1 percent of the total population fell below the poverty line. The figure for African-Americans was 24.1 percent; that is, one out of four. Almost seventeen percent of all American children and one out of every three black children were living below the poverty line. In this same year, however, only 5.3 percent of American children lived in households that received TANF benefits. It has become much harder for needy Americans to obtain poverty assistance since the 1960s and 70s. Eligibility rules have been tightened, time limits have been imposed, and recipients must name the absent second parent of their children and participate in a mandatory work assignment in order to receive benefits. Even if they do receive TANF, however, poor families only see their income increase by a few hundred dollars each month. The pressure upon poor mothers with children to go into the paid labor force is enormous, but studies of TANF leavers indicate that they are experiencing severe difficulties in finding and keeping a living wage job. The rolls have been cut, but extreme poverty is becoming more commonplace.

In addition, this harsh welfare regime includes what I call a sexual regulation dimension. Animated by vicious racist slander about the “welfare queen,” these policies are deliberately designed to reduce childbearing and childrearing among poor women in the United States and to punish the families that are not headed by a marital couple. The child support enforcement rule has a direct impact upon about twenty million adults at any given moment. Under its terms, every single mother receiving TANF benefits must name the absent father — that is, her spouse, or, in the case of never married women, the biological father — of her children and assist the state in pursuing him for child support. Not that she benefits if he is found and begins to make payments; the government captures almost all of the support monies to pay itself back for her benefits. Most of the men who are named as payers are too poor to meet their obligations. In some cases, they are unemployed or incarcerated; in others, their own wages are too low. Studies have found that most of these needy women do in fact want their male partners to make a contribution to their household, but that they want the freedom to identify the responsible party according to their own values and to design a contribution arrangement that is suited to their circumstances. By and large, they do not want the government to interfere with their personal affairs in this manner. Because the exemptions for the victims of domestic violence are woefully inadequate, and because many of the payers take revenge upon the TANF mothers, the child support enforcement rule places a particularly harsh burden upon dv survivors. (The other sexual regulation measures include the family cap, marriage promotion, and abstinence education.)

Many leading feminists, including Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, are enthusiastic supporters of welfare reform, workfare, and the child support enforcement rule. Other feminists, including Rep. Patsy Mink (HI) and thirteen other women of color representing the Democratic Party in Congress, did everything they could to oppose these measures, in the name of poor mothers' right to a decent standard of living, their right to benefits in return for their caregiving labor, and their right to privacy. Why do we have this split on welfare reform among American feminists, and why has Sen. Clinton been so successful at mis-representing herself as a staunch feminist ally of American women? I will offer a schematic summary of my thinking on this issue.

- 1) Welfare reform debates among feminists shine a light upon the unfinished work within the American feminist movement where confronting racism and white supremacy is concerned; by the same token, welfare reform and economic inequality in general is one of the most significant racially-constructed political issues in contemporary American politics.
- 2) Unlike the feminist movements in some of the other developed countries, American feminism has never been deeply informed by a dialogue with a strong labor movement that represents the interests of low wage workers.
- 3) American feminists are not immune from the prevailing ideological tendencies that are prominent in American society as a whole, including the fetishism of the market, the mythical figure of the rugged individual, and the work ethic; the attack on the public sphere and the normalization of regressive tax policies; and a Puritanical approach to deviant families and sexualities.

4) During a period of tremendous defeats — on the ERA, the Hyde Amendment and the general rollback of abortion rights, affirmative action, the treatment of women in the national spotlight such as Geraldine Ferraro and Anita Hill, Reaganism, and now, post-9/11, the rise of a militarist and imperialist masculine culture — and the consolidation of the two-party system since 1980, ambitious women in the political mainstream have been eager to find an issue field in which they could gain bipartisan credentials. At the same time, the power base of the American feminist movement has moved toward middle-class women oriented lobbying and legal reform projects. Grassroots activism has continued to flourish (RiotGrrrls, Women’s Action Coalition, Code Pink, campus groups, and so on) but it has generally prioritized anti-war and cultural projects. Sen. Clinton’s support for welfare reform might alienate the working class black women who are the backbone of a community-based reproductive health project, for example, but those women cannot transfer their vote to anyone to the left of the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, the middle-class white women who are targeted by centrist national women’s organizations like Emily’s List largely applaud Sen. Clinton’s stance on welfare reform or ignore it altogether. In a country dominated by the two parties and single issue lobbying — where a politician merely has to declare his or her support for the thinnest imaginable construction of abortion rights in order to be accepted as a reliable feminist advocate —, powerful women like Sen.

Clinton are free to gain political ground in the mainstream by embracing the harshest type of neoliberal attacks on poor mothers.

(For a more detailed and referenced version of these arguments, please refer to my recent book, *Welfare Reform and Sexual Regulation*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.)