

UCLA

**Volume III. 1986-87 - Women at Work: The Conference Papers,
May 1987**

Title

Women, Work, and Welfare: The Need for a Community Model

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1192n0kr>

Author

Welch, Mary Beth

Publication Date

1987-05-01

Notice:

This working paper was printed by the Institute as a means for disseminating the research findings of Institute and University-related scholars. The text is provided in order to facilitate academic discourse and is free to use for personal academic purposes utilizing proper citation. Copyright of the information contained within lies with the authors, and requests for use other than personal research purposes must be directed to the authors.

WOMEN, WORK, AND WELFARE:
THE NEED FOR A COMMUNITY MODEL

Mary Beth Welch

ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

Mary Beth Welch is a Ph.D. Candidate in the UCLA Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning. She is currently a research assistant at the UCLA Center for Child and Family Policy, School of Social Welfare, working on the GAIN (AFDC) Participant Needs Assessment being conducted for the Los Angeles County Department of Public and Social Services.

A version of this paper was prepared for the UCLA Conference on WOMEN AT WORK, May 1987, sponsored by the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, the Institute of Industrial Relations, and the Institute for Social Science Research. Twelve papers from the conference are available in the ISSR Working Papers Series (see ordering information in this volume).

In September 1985, the California State Assembly initiated a job training/workfare for welfare recipients called GAIN, Greater Avenues for Independence. This program, though barely underway, is already seen as a model for future workfare programs in other states as well as at the federal level. GAIN and other workfare proposals raise the issue of how women in low-wage work are to sustain themselves. This paper explores the need for policy makers to focus on neighborhood development when creating programs intended to move women (who are disproportionately women of color) off the welfare rolls and into wage labor.

GAIN is a mandatory job training and job placement program for recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The GAIN legislation is a bi-partisan product, the product of many lobbying and opposition groups;

the conservatives got a mandatory job training and job search program. Liberals got the largest commitment yet seen for the provision, and, if need be, the development of child care; a stipulation that all counties meet state guidelines in the planning of their programs, and conduct studies on labor market, existing child care, educational resources and participant needs; a commitment on the part of the state to the provision of remedial education, including GED equivalency and ESL instruction; and a floor on the hourly wage at 185 percent of median area wages, which amounts to about \$5.35 per hour. Participants in GAIN will be provided free child care for children under 12, transportation costs, and job-related or training-related expenses up to \$450.

There are many aspects of GAIN and similar job programs and workfare programs that need critical attention. First, low-waged and low-skilled labor cannot adequately support families. A job at \$5.35 per hour amounts to only \$642 per month. The average single parent receiving welfare has two children; she has to pay the rent, utilities, food, and extra expenses associated with going to work. Secondly, what happens to the participant after she gets a job? Three months after getting the job she will lose her free child care and, depending on the amount of her earnings, her medical benefits. Without child care or medical benefits she is likely to recycle back onto welfare. Most AFDC recipients are not chronic recipients of welfare; most are marginal workers who move off welfare due to employment, only to move back on welfare due to inadequate pay and benefits to support their family's needs. Very frequently a family will return to the welfare office due to medical needs: the United States does not have a medical insurance system to support family heads in jobs with no health benefits or insufficient wages to buy private policies. Yet we can see that it is these same low-skilled, low-waged, low-benefit jobs which are in the expanding industries expected to pick up the additional AFDC parents being pushed into waged labor.

This paper is primarily concerned with community and neighborhood development and its relationship to women's efficacy in their multiple roles. We know little about the relationships between women's poverty, welfare, support services, personal empowerment, vocational training, and neighborhood economic development. Jacqueline Leavitt and her colleague Susan Saegert are presently working on a book which explores the need for a new planning model she calls the "community model" (Leavitt and Saegert, forthcoming). This work is based on their study of low income families which have successfully homesteaded formerly abandoned buildings in Harlem. They assert that community and housing development need to incorporate the support of informal and formal exchanges among community residents. Gerda Wekerle (1985) points out that "the sociological literature on the neighborhood has tended to overemphasize its function as a locale for social interaction while paying scant attention to the neighborhood's function in the delivery of essential urban services to residents at various stages of the life cycle." She goes on to explore the neighborhood needs of the single mother and mothers in the labor force, but focuses on middle class experience, giving little consideration for the particular experience of very low income women who live in poverty areas. Lydia O'Donnell and Ann Stueve (1981) point out the seeming paradox that employed mothers may be more dependent on the local environment just when work attachments take them out of the neighborhood and home. Over 80 percent of the expected mandatory participants in the GAIN program have no access to a car. For low-income women, who are for the most part dependent on public transportation, the neighborhood may become even more important: she won't have as much time to go out of her neighborhood to do the shopping or go to medical appointments with her children; she'll have additional trips such as taking her children to child care, getting her own clothes to the laundry and cleaners, and finding a place for her teenage children whom she will no longer be able to supervise in what may be a high crime neighborhood.

Feminist literature in the areas of geography, environmental psychology, and urban planning have highlighted the mismatch between women's spatial needs and the built environment (Rosenbloom 1978; Stimpson et al. 1980; and Wekerle 1980). Because women have been identified with home and not the public environment, physical planning has given little consideration for women at work, or women combining their roles as mother and wage earner. A number of studies show that women prefer to work near where they live. Women dependent on public transportation look for jobs near bus lines that are near home. A mother (especially a single mother) knows she needs to be available if the child is sick, and she wants the shortest journey to work that is possible so she can take care of her jobs as mother and homemaker after her eight hour day.

This research suggests that there needs to be more attention paid to the community and neighborhood needs of women who are being pushed out of welfare and into workfare and jobs. It's very possible that going to work may totally disrupt the neighborhood support system that has built up around getting welfare and staying home. Low income women tend to have less in terms of formal community services and are in greater need of public services and local supports. But what is missing in formal supports often exists informally, as in demonstrated in such accounts as Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (1974), which deals with a very low income midwestern community called "the flats." Stack found that there were extensive kinship networks which provided for its members. When some had more, they gave to those who had less. While I gained a deep appreciation of the informal networks of support in an established poor black neighborhood, I also was perplexed about social policy that directs its benefits towards individuals when benefits, goods, and services are shared in the community. I would propose that there has to be a community orientation linked to social welfare income maintenance policy. Further, when individuals are being pulled into the labor force, the new activity needs to be supported by appropriate neighborhood development.

If women on welfare are to be encouraged to work, then neighborhood service will have to be created to support them. In Los Angeles County, some 25 percent of potential mandatory participants have had no connection to the labor force. Another 25 percent have not worked at all in the past two years. Therefore, 50 percent of the population which is likely to be mandatory participants will be making a major adjustment in their families' lives. Neighborhood services are needed much more as the single mother adds on the role of wage earner to her roles of parent and homemaker. Many needs that she and her support network took care of in the home will now require the support of stores, child care, and employment near where she lives.

Community development is not a new concept. In the 1960s the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) established a number of community development corporations (CDCs) whose mission was to improve the lives of the poor residents of low income communities by creating employment opportunities and increasing income. That vision never considered the community needs in terms of women and their triple roles; moreover, funding soon decreased as the war on poverty lost favor. Increasingly, neighborhood based ventures did not create sufficient profit to legitimate the effort. The community development movement began to establish outside ventures that would support housing development or physical improvement such as parks in the neighborhood, giving up the early commitment to community based services and commercial enterprises. What is interesting is that there are numerous examples of grassroots women's groups that set their goals on developing non-profit services for the community--as well as jobs--and have been successful. There appears to be more awareness of the importance of neighborhood when the organizers and the focus is women and their families.

Community development strategies generally focus on bringing investment

into the community, or even creating commercial life, but usually don't consider what specific life is needed in the neighborhood to support women as workers, mothers, and homemakers. Groups such as the National Congress of Neighborhood Women have been tapping women's leadership potential and fostering projects such as women's education projects, housing development, and the identification and resolution of community problems. The National Economic Development and Law Center (NEDLC) has been working with low income women's organizations to develop economic development strategies that address the employment, housing, and social service needs of low income women.

However from the few articles that have dealt with welfare mothers and community economic development, I have found numerous examples of the success of woman-centered neighborhood development. "Operation Life" in Las Vegas is an example of welfare mothers whose priorities in community development were health clinics, nutrition programs, recreation programs, a library, and a bank (Anderson 1980). They have also started a job training program to train women in non-traditional jobs. Some other programs begun in low income communities in Oakland and Sacramento include a community health care clinic and a child care training program which cares for children of teenage mothers in school (Economic Development and Law Center Report 1986).

How is the GAIN program responding to women's neighborhood needs? In Los Angeles child care, jobs, and training will be coordinated so they will fall into the major zip code cluster areas that the County is using to divide the Los Angeles County area. But these six areas contain some 40 zip code areas each. Further, any opportunity for community based training and job development is subverted by training performance requirements that virtually eliminate all but Job Training Partnership Act training sites from consideration. Local community organizations are not equipped to meet the guidelines of the GAIN regulations: namely that the training site carry the costs of training the individual, being reimbursed only after the participant has gotten a job. An opportunity for local neighborhood development through small non-profit women's organizations has been lost due to the financial demands being placed on job training agencies. With more vision, an alternative means of controlling performance could be implemented; for instance, non-renewal of contract might be sufficient.

Still, what remains problematic is that services are marginal industries, and therefore pay low wages and have low benefits and little room for advancement. A solution is public/private partnership in the development of these service industries. With the federal underwriting of costs, wages and benefits can be paid at levels adequate to support single mothers and their families without supplementary welfare income support. The National Economic Development and Law Center published a special report on women and economic development which focused on low income women and their communities. Successful projects include child care, health projects, and sewing collectives as well as non-traditional jobs such as road work. The special report includes an article on Wisconsin's State Assembly creation of a nonprofit corporation which in turn has developed the Women's Economic Development Program. The two major goals of the program are to create employment opportunities and economic self-sufficiency for low-income women in Wisconsin and to assist women's organizations in learning and using business development skills to create for-profit businesses.

In conclusion, feminist research shows that women prefer to work close to home, and that it is important for women to have community supports in order for them to work. That suggests that jobs should be created in the neighborhoods where the women live, and that the jobs developed should be in local services that will support working women: examples of services are child care, teen centers, recreation centers, grocery stores, hardware stores, medical clinics, gas/auto repair, house repair/rehabilitation, and credit unions.

Surprisingly little is written in the feminist literature regarding women and poverty, women and economic development, or women and welfare in the United States.[1] Due to this omission, feminist critiques of social welfare and economic development for women remain thin. There are only scattered observations that job training hasn't worked well for women, and that women are funneled into traditionally female service positions--the lowest paying jobs. However, grassroots groups such as the Women's Economic Agenda Project in Oakland, the Women's Economic Agenda Working Group in Washington, D.C., the Women's Economic Development Corporation (WEDCO) in Minneapolis, and the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) are seeking to put women's poverty and policy issues on the local, state and federal agendas. Neighborhood needs, in terms of the commercial, service, and job development which is appropriate for women's lives should be part of that agenda.

1. The journal SIGNS devoted one special issue to Women and Poverty in Winter, 1984, but Feminist Abstracts lists no articles about women and neighborhood or economic development in the United States, and few articles about women and welfare.

REFERENCES

Anderson, J.R.

1980 Can welfare mothers do economic development? Economic Development and Law Center Report, March/April 1980.

Economic Development and Law Center Report

1986 Issue on women. Economic Development and Law Center Report 15:6 and 16:1, Spring 1986.

Leavitt, J. and S. Saegert

n.d. The Making of Community Households: Responses to Housing Abandonment in Harlem. [Forthcoming.]

O'Donnell, L. and A. Stueve

1981 Employed women: mothers and good neighbors. Urban and Social Change Review 14:21-26.

Rosenbloom, S., Editor

1978 Women's Travel Issues: Research Needs and Priorities. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Transportation.

Stack, C.B.

1974 All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community. New York: Harper and Row.

Stimpson et al., Editors

1980 Women and the American City. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wekerle, G.

1985 From refuge to service center: neighborhoods that support women. Sociological Focus 18:2.

Wekerle, G., Editor

1980 New Space for Women. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Requests for ordering copies of this paper should be submitted to:

Working Papers

Institute for Social Science Research

UCLA

Box 951484

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1484

or email: issr@issr.ucla.edu