

FEMALES AND WELFARE

by Betsy Warrior

There are 35 million poor people in this country. A THIRD OF THE POOR LIVE IN FAMILIES HEADED BY FEMALES. Many of these families are on welfare, and more should be getting some kind of welfare supplement added to their income. Many of us think that in the richest nation in the world there should be no poor people at all, and that the political and economic reasons for their existence must come to an end.

Why were the welfare mothers picked by radical organizers to disrupt the political system, with the economic breakdown on a local level, and the change in the whole political structure that their demands might bring?

Since five million of the poor are aged, it isn't likely that these older people would start an active fight against the system that kept them in poverty. Old people are more conservative and lack the energy and determination for a prolonged fight. But other families, a lot of them headed by males -- why don't they fight the system that made them poor? They could fight for an adequate income.

What are the special qualities welfare mothers possess, to make them the ones chosen to fight the establishment? The basic reason is mothers will fight for their children, to supply their needs, and they will struggle for as long as it takes for their children to grow up. They possess both will and sustained determination to demand long and loud that the political structure allow their children enough to live on decently, and in doing so change the political structure.

The fact that most of the families on welfare are headed by females says just as much about the status of females in this country as it does about the political economy. Females in this country are too often dependent on someone else for their livelihood. Many lack an education good enough to allow them to support a family by themselves; or if they have an adequate education, they don't have the time or energy left after the duties of motherhood, household drudgery and menial tasks, to use it. Women have a status as dependent human beings in this country that doesn't change, whether it's one man or the state that allows them money to live on.

Bringing welfare mothers together to fight for themselves has many positive aspects. It helps them to see their situation isn't caused by personal inadequacy, but the fault of a bad economic system. They find more can be achieved by speaking out and joining together to fight the welfare department than by remaining quiet and alone, or trying to hide the fact that they're on welfare. Of course, this only applies to the women who can be encouraged to join the welfare groups. There are many who are too defeated and afraid to even try to help themselves, these women are even more in need of incentive and help.

The females in the group can become more politically aware of how their lives are run by city hall and demystify the local bureaucracy for themselves. By alleviating some of their more pressing material needs it might give them and their children more energy and hope to tackle some of the many other problems they have as females and human beings.

But the great majority of welfare mothers do not realize what long range effects their actions will have on the system. They're being used as political fodder by men who want the system changed for themselves, and any benefits the mothers receive in the process are purely coincidental or material.

The welfare mothers run the risk of becoming as competitive, aggressive and power-hungry as the males who oppress them. This is because their groups are being patterned after the structure of male organizations, by male organizers, establishing a context of leaders and followers, encouraging competition for recognition and power between the women in the groups.

Though the mothers may change their material and political position, they won't be free until they identify their oppression as being inherent in the role they play as females, and abolish that role. Without consciousness of their inferior status as women they will remain the victims of society and merely tools of the people who wish to use

their dissatisfaction to break the system.

Whether the money a mother receives is doled out by a husband or a paternalistic welfare department makes little difference. Both are degrading, and many women prefer welfare to a husband. It is her position as a dependent female in relationships to males that is at the root of her problem.

For instance, if an active welfare mother gets married, her husband usually doesn't let her continue her work in the group. It is time-consuming and he wants all her time spent on him, being his house slave. So her experience that could be very valuable to other members of the group is wasted, and her relative independence is ended.

It is common practice for the male directors and superintendents of welfare to use the female clerks and secretaries as flunkies to transmit their refusals of help and threats to the welfare mothers, while they remain protected behind locked doors. Although most of the social workers are female, men have a monopoly on the positions of power in the welfare system. The social workers carry out their decisions and receive the scorn and abuse of the mothers. This confuses the mothers as to who the real enemy is. The women who work in the welfare department are poorly paid and overworked, not much better off than the welfare mothers, but they are set one against the other. Until they can see each other as sisters in oppression and start liberating themselves as females, they might succeed in changing the system, but others (men) will benefit more by their success. Though the mothers will be the ones to bear the brunt of reaction and risk what little they have....

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