

OUR RIGHTS ARE NOT FOR SALE: MOTHERHOOD, CITIZENSHIP, AND
THE AMERICAN WELFARE STATE, 1969-1973

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This dissertation will explore the intersections between race and gender in the US welfare system. Focusing on the ways in which ideas about motherhood and citizenship are contested in discourses around welfare, it will show how competing groups mobilized these ideas in very different ways. It will analyze the use of motherhood and citizenship in the activism of welfare rights recipients in the late 1960s and 1970s at a national and local level and read this in conversation with the state's discourse around welfare and its use of images of motherhood and citizenship. In particular, it will look at welfare reform attempts in the 91st and 92nd Congress, as well as the National Welfare Rights Organization's campaign against President Nixon's Family Assistance Plan (FAP), and local grassroots campaigns across the USA. It will argue that in the prevailing political culture of the 1970s, by claiming their right to speak as mothers and as citizens welfare recipients articulated a radical position that fundamentally challenged prevailing historic and social assumptions about who counted as a mother and as a citizen and thus started an important debate about what motherhood and citizenship meant in the United States.

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'It's just like a mother that's living in the suburbs and has two children. That's just ideal, but when you're on welfare and got two children you're supposed to be out working and farm those kids out...The system. It's saying, this mother is wonderful, but if you're on welfare, you're trash.'
Minnesota Welfare Rights Organization member, 1967.¹

*'I said, for instance, that even if you have a child two years of age, you need to go to work. And people said, 'Well that's heartless,' and I said 'No, no, I'm willing to spend more giving daycare to allow those parents to go back to work, but I want the individuals to have the dignity of work'.
'This is a hero of mine. I happen to think that all moms are working moms. And if you have five sons, your work is never over'*
Mitt Romney, Republican Presidential Candidate, 2012.²

Introduction: Feminist Scholarship, Welfare Activism, and Framing the Welfare State

At various points throughout the last century the US government has reimagined its welfare state and, in doing so, rewritten its obligations and responsibilities to the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Most recently, on August 22nd 1996, President Clinton passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOR) 'ending welfare as we know it'.³ This Act marked the end of the existence of a minimal federal safety net in the welfare state. Furthermore, it marked the end of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), one of the most maligned and misunderstood New Deal programs. Replacing AFDC with Temporary Aid to Families with Needy Children (TANF), PWROR introduced a five year fixed time limit on welfare payments and ended the sixty year old reassurance that the federal government would help support those families who could not support themselves. However, just thirty years earlier, a Republican President came close to an even more fundamental reinvention of the

¹ Quoted in Susan Hertz, 'The Politics of the Welfare Mothers Movement: A Case Study', *Signs*, Spring 1977, p.605.

² Emily Friedman, 'Romney Comments on Working Moms, Ann Says Women Aren't Special Interest, Just Special', accessed 27 April 2012, <http://www.abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics>; Chris Hayes, 'Romney: Welfare Parents "need to go to work"', accessed 27 April 2012, <http://www.upwithchrishayes.msnbc.msn.com>.

³ President Clinton, 'Remarks on Welfare Reform', August 22 1996, in *Welfare: A Documentary History of US Policy and Politics*, eds. G. Mink and R. Solinger, (New York; New York University Press, 2003), p.662.

welfare state through the implementation of a guaranteed income. Had it been passed, President Nixon's Family Assistance Plan (FAP) would have established the principle that all American families were entitled to a minimum yearly income and enshrined in law that the state had a responsibility to provide this if wage employment alone could not. President Nixon was not alone in this endeavor and at various points in the early 1970s the campaign to introduce a guaranteed income had support from Democrats and Republicans in Congress as well as the President. The campaign was also fundamentally shaped by the existence of a strong welfare rights movement, embodied on the national stage by the existence of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO).

This dissertation will focus on the fight to introduce a guaranteed income. In particular, it will analyze the way in which images of motherhood and citizenship were contested in this debate and how competing groups sought to mobilize these images to support their campaigns. Focusing on the national political arena; the NWRO; and local welfare rights groups, it will demonstrate how welfare recipients wielded concepts of motherhood and citizenship to challenge the dominant political culture and claim the right to define their own needs. It will also demonstrate how politicians constructed images of mothers and citizens to legitimate their own legislative agendas. This introduction will first analyze the connections between motherhood and citizenship within the welfare state and situate this project in relation to the contemporary discourses on welfare. Secondly, placing this thesis within the existing literature, it will examine the epistemological and methodological frameworks underpinning its analysis and provide an outline of the following chapters and foreshadow the thesis's central argument.

I focus on motherhood and citizenship because both concepts are fundamental to understanding the relationship between the welfare state and welfare recipients. The welfare state technically refers to a whole body of federal and state funded provisions, including entitlement programs like Medicaid and Social Security and institutions like public schools and courthouses. However, in reality, the public perception of welfare has been much more narrowly defined. Increasingly synonymous with Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and now Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, debates around welfare have centered on the state's obligation to provide for poor mothers and particularly single mothers of color. Welfare mothers, embodied in the 1980s by the racialized and gendered trope of the "welfare queen", have been demonized in the popular media and viewed as responsible for causing poverty and social deprivation. As a result the programs that serve them have been regularly portrayed as reinforcing a culture of poverty rather than tackling its causes. As such, these programs have long been the central target of welfare reformers, conservative, liberal and radical. Thus when it came to claiming welfare rights, it is not surprising that AFDC mothers made up the overwhelming majority of the membership of welfare rights groups. For these women it was their status as mothers that defined their relationship with the state, inspired their denigration in the wider political discourse and led to the denial of their rights as citizens.

For women generally, motherhood and citizenship are deeply intertwined in their relationship with the state. Carole Pateman has argued that women's relationship with the state and their status as citizens is constructed on a major

paradox.⁴ She contends that the ability to bear children has always been the physical marker of difference between men and women that has underpinned the traditional argument that women could not be considered full citizens. Yet, at the same time, she argues, motherhood itself has been ‘constructed as a political status’ through which women have been able to claim some of the rights of citizenship.⁵ Pateman argues that where men have been required to die for the state in order to be considered citizens, beginning with notions of “republican motherhood,” women have argued that their maternal obligation to give birth and raise future citizens makes them worthy of citizenship rights. As such, women have been included and excluded from citizenship on the ‘basis of the very same capacities and attributes’.⁶ It is important to highlight the paradoxical nature of this entanglement between motherhood and citizenship because it is the ambiguity and uncertainty in that relationship that makes these two discourses so integral in the debate over a guaranteed adequate income. In seeking to legitimate their respective demands, these entangled terms allowed welfare recipients to simultaneously exalt their roles as mothers and to demand their rights as citizens at the same time as they allowed legislators to present mothers and citizens as mutually exclusive identities.

However, the relationship between motherhood, citizenship and welfare is even more complex. Welfare recipients have not simply been excluded (or included) from citizenship on the grounds of their capacity for motherhood. Instead recipients have been historically excluded from both the hegemonic image of the good mother and good citizen. In reality, mothers as a collective have been stratified and certain groups systematically excluded from citizenship on the basis of their class

⁴ C. Pateman, ‘Equality, Difference, Subordination: The Politics of Motherhood and Women’s Citizenship’, in *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, eds. G. Block and S. James, (London; Routledge, 1992), pp.17-31.

⁵ C. Pateman, ‘Equality, Difference, Subordination’, in *Beyond Equality*, p.19.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 19.

and race. There is clearly a strong causal link between those mothers considered as “good” and those able to access some of the rights and privileges of citizenship. As historian Ruth Feldstein argues, ‘ideologies of motherhood are thus a lens through which to view gendered and racial concepts of citizenship’.⁷ As she suggests, the relationship between motherhood and citizenship is deeply embedded within debates about who the state should support. Thus understanding the relationship between the two is crucial to understanding how the state positions citizens differently. The welfare system, in particular, is a key site for understanding the relationship between class, race, gender and the state because, as Micheal Katz argues in his work on welfare and citizenship in the US, it is the ‘welfare state [that] codifies our collective obligations toward one another and defines the terms of membership in the national community.’⁸

In recent decades, the US welfare state has demonstrated the continued racialized and gendered limits of that membership for certain groups in society. Despite President Clinton’s rhetoric, PWROR was based on the same raced and gendered subtext as earlier reform bills. It was underpinned by the same philosophy that argued that a ‘mother’s poverty flows from moral failings’ and that sought to connect single mothers either to men or to the labor market rather than consider them as individuals in their own right.⁹ Furthermore, despite the abolition of Aid to Families with Dependent Children by President Clinton in 1996, the “welfare queen” trope continues to have political power. Welfare mothers are still stigmatized by the state while “good” mothers remain exalted. This is starkly evident in the 2012 Presidential Election. In May 2012 a Democratic strategist,

⁷ R. Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), p.5.

⁸ M. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining America's Welfare State*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), pp. 1-2.

⁹ G. Mink, *Welfare's End*, (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1998), p.4.

Hilary Rosen, was accused of attacking the wife of the Republican Presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, for being a fulltime mother who had never worked. In the immediate aftermath, Romney actively spoke out in defense of his wife, Ann, calling her a ‘hero’ and identifying all fulltime mothers as ‘working moms’. However, the story reemerged a few weeks later when a tape was discovered of Romney speaking earlier in New Hampshire earlier in favor of work requirements for welfare mothers on the grounds that people need to ‘have the dignity of work’.¹⁰

Although most news stories focused on criticizing Romney personally for adopting contradictory but politically convenient positions, some did point out that these contradictory views were not unique but were instead embedded in the structure of the US welfare system.¹¹ However, few recognized that debates about work requirements for welfare mothers preceded PRWOR and none addressed the embedded racist and sexist assumptions underpinning discourses around motherhood and the recognition of motherhood as legitimate work. In reality, the contradictions embodied in Mitt Romney’s comments in 2012 were remarkably similar to the contradictions that welfare recipients had challenged in the 1960s and 1970s, as the quote at the opening of this thesis demonstrates. Equally, the prominence of motherhood in Michelle Obama’s and Ann Romney’s speeches at the Democratic and Republican conventions, respectively, demonstrates that the concept remains a powerful political image even though it is still only applied to certain women in society. Ultimately, US welfare policy is still classed, raced and gendered and its relationship with motherhood and citizenship remains contested

¹⁰ See Ezra Klein, “Mitt Romney flashback: Stay-at-home moms need to learn ‘dignity of work’”, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein>, accessed on April 27 2012].

¹¹ For example, Ezra Klein, “Mitt Romney flashback: Stay-at-home moms need to learn ‘dignity of work’”, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein>.

ground. In the current political climate, where the welfare queen image continues to hold more weight than the lived experiences of recipients, and where even the minimal federal safety net has been removed, it is crucial to reevaluate an earlier moment in welfare history and to examine how welfare mothers challenged the dominant political culture that deemed them non agents.

While this dissertation focuses primarily on the welfare rights movement and the competing discourses around welfare in the late 1960s and 1970s, any work on welfare must be situated within the wider body of feminist literature that addresses the United States welfare system. Since the 1990s much work has been done to demonstrate the racist and sexist underpinnings of welfare policies and to expose the entrenched raced and gendered stereotypes in discourses around welfare. This review will focus on the dominant approaches taken by scholars and, in particular, it will examine the emergence of two general perspectives on the history of the American welfare state: policy orientated approaches that examine the racialized and gendered assumptions that permeate twentieth century welfare policies; and grassroots approaches which foreground agency and activism among welfare mothers and focus on the lived experience of welfare recipients. I will consider the strengths and weaknesses of each and argue that in bridging these two literatures, this thesis can offer new insights into the relationship between welfare recipients and the state.

Scholars like Linda Gordon, Gwendolyn Mink and Jill Quadagno have all approached the welfare state from a policy angle and have focused on tracing the evolution of federal welfare policies and understanding the racist and sexist

assumptions that continue to permeate welfare discourses.¹² In *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare*, Linda Gordon argues that the negative associations of welfare programs and the negative stereotyping of welfare recipients can be traced back to the establishment of the Social Security Act in 1935 and, in particular, the creation of Aid to Dependent Children, later known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (ADC; AFDC). The 1935 Act embedded a racialized and gendered hierarchy within the Social Security system, which distinguished between federally funded social insurance programs, such as Old Age Insurance, which primarily catered to white male industrial workers and later their wives, and locally administered federal-state funded public assistance programs that catered for everyone else.¹³ The Social Security Act was the product of a discourse around welfare which sought to reinforce traditional family structures and maintain racial hierarchies in the South. It was therefore designed to shore up male breadwinner families and to enforce the idea of women's dependence rather than to allow single mothers to provide for their families successfully. Gordon argues that ADC could have been designed to support all poor children but that it was designed instead to explicitly and publicly separate out single mothers from other 'worthier' recipients of welfare.¹⁴ In *Welfare's End*, Gwendolyn Mink picks up on Gordon's analysis of the gendered roots of welfare policy and follows it through the debates in the 1990s on welfare reform. She highlights the continuation of a moral discourse around welfare which centered on gendered assumptions about the necessity of male involvement in families.¹⁵

¹² L. Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled, Single Mothers and the History of Welfare 1890-1935*, (New York: Macmillan Press, 1994); G. Mink, *Welfare's End*; J. Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹³ L. Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, p.5.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.281.

¹⁵ G. Mink, *Welfare's End*, p.4.

In *The Color of Welfare*, Jill Quadagno takes a similar approach to the welfare state but focuses explicitly on its racialized nature. Quadagno argues that race has been the ‘governing force from the nation’s founding to the present’ and that historians have not paid enough attention to racial inequality in the welfare state.¹⁶ While she agrees that the twin tracks of the Social Security Act of 1935 embedded racial hierarchies into welfare policy, her primary focus is on the welfare state in the 1960s and 1970s. She argues that, as part of the War on Poverty, Presidents Johnson and Nixon tried to deconstruct the racist welfare state that the New Deal era had created and replace it with an equal opportunities welfare state. Through the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity and President Nixon’s proposed Family Assistance Plan they hoped to bypass state administrations by providing federal funding and assistance, in part with the goal of reconstructing African American families. Thus, she emphasizes that the real targets of FAP were not welfare mothers specifically but instead young black men who the state hoped to encourage into forming stable relationships and families.¹⁷

Like Mink and Gordon, Quadagno’s general approach reveals a great deal about the existence and continuation of raced and gendered biases within the welfare state. It also provides crucial background for understanding the assumptions embedded in the policies that NWRO activists were fighting. Furthermore, their work forcefully demonstrates that welfare policies are neither neutral nor natural but instead serve particular agendas and benefit certain groups at the expense of others. This was something that NWRO activists understood all too well and is clearly reflected in their campaign against the Family Assistance

¹⁶ J. Quadagno, *Color of Welfare*, p.188.

¹⁷ *Ibid* p.5.

Plan which they claimed meant ‘Guaranteed Poverty’.¹⁸ However, while Gordon, Mink and Quadagno all consider the intersections between race and gender, they tend to privilege one or the other as analytical frameworks rather than embracing a truly intersectional analysis. In some respects all three authors reference both the racialized and gendered elements of welfare policy. Gordon recognizes that bureaucratic structures were created partly to bar black southerners from the better paid welfare streams in order to ensure that they could not reject the domestic or agricultural jobs crucial to sustaining a white-dominated southern economy. Equally, Quadagno discusses the intersections of race and gender in the debate over a national childcare program under President Nixon.¹⁹ However, in focusing primarily on either the raced or the gendered ideologies around welfare policies, it is impossible for either scholar to fully explore the ways in which individuals, and particularly black women, experienced both the raced and gendered implications of a policy simultaneously.

While Mink, Gordon and Quadagno provide illuminating analyses of the racialized and gendered nature of welfare policies, their approach does not fully illuminate how raced and gendered stereotypes became so embedded in the discourse around welfare or what the relationship is between these stereotypes and welfare policies. Other works on the welfare state are more helpful in this respect. For example, Ange-Marie Hancock and Holloway Sparks both write about the relationship between black women, the state and the media and analyze the

¹⁸ “Adequate Income Now”, *Welfare Fighter*, Special edition 1970, Newsletter of the National Welfare Rights Organization, September 1969 – October 1972, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, reel 76.

¹⁹ L. Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, p.12; J. Quadagno, *Color of Welfare*, p.135.

relationships between misrecognition by the state and welfare reform.²⁰ Both Hancock and Sparks are primarily interested in understanding how misrecognition works in the public sphere.²¹ Although they focus on the discourse around the 1996 welfare reform bill, the way in which they frame the relationship between stereotypes, misrecognition and political participation in the democratic process is also useful for understanding the way in which raced and gendered stereotypes worked in the dominant political culture in the 1960s and 1970s.

Hancock argues that the welfare queen trope represents the conflation of public and private identities into one homogenous racialized and gendered image of a poor African American single mother as the archetypal welfare recipient. Moreover, she claims that this image engenders disgust for all welfare recipients among the wider population. Hancock's analysis is persuasive in many ways because it helps to explain why the image of the welfare queen has remained so politically salient. Furthermore, it examines the work such stereotypes do in the public sphere. Not only does the 'welfare queen' image pollute democratic attention by silencing the claims of certain citizens but it also furthers specific legislative agendas by minimizing the structural causes of poverty and emphasizing individual moral failings instead.²² As will be discussed later, the same is true of the images of mothers and citizens used by legislators in the debates over FAP. Sparks makes a similar claim in her article on the debate surrounding the passage

²⁰ A. Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: the Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*, (New York: New York University Press, 2004); H. Sparks, "Queens, Teens, and Model Mothers: Race, Gender and the Discourse of Welfare Reform", in *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, eds. Sanford F. Schram, Joe Soss, and Richard C. Fording, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp.171-195.

²¹I use Ange Marie Hancock's term 'misrecognition' rather than the term misrepresentation because it more precisely conveys the idea that the demonization of welfare recipients is a dynamic process that involves both the attribution of a false group identity to recipients and the widespread acceptance of this on an individual level which prevents recipients from participating fully in democratic life.

²² A. Hancock, *Politics of Disgust*, p.9.

of PWROR. She argues that ‘controlling images’ like the ‘welfare queen’ or the ‘teen mom’ create narratives that center on individual failings rather than structural inequalities. Such narratives mask the true demographics and needs of welfare recipients and leads to a widespread denigration of certain citizens’ political claims.²³

Hancock and Sparks both focus on the media and on state discourses around PWROR and their connections to conservative discourses in the 1980s. Following this line of analysis further back, Jennifer Mittelstadt, Ruth Feldstein and Marisa Chappell trace the relationship between raced and gendered images of welfare recipients and moralistic welfare policies back to liberal reforms in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.²⁴ All three demonstrate how liberal reformers drew on the paradigm of black cultural pathology outlined in the writings of sociologist E Franklin Frazier and, later, in the infamous Moynihan report. Chappell and Mittelstadt, in particular, focus on the roots of workfare in welfare policies and highlight the relationship between workfare and racially and sexually charged images of welfare recipients as lazy and undeserving of state support. While Mittelstadt sees the origins of this narrative in 1940s liberal doctrines of rehabilitation, Chappell centers her analysis on the liberal reformers of the 1960s and 1970s and their continued obsession with the idea of the family wage. She argues that liberal reformers saw AFDC as undermining the male breadwinner system and sought to reinforce it through the introduction of a Guaranteed Income that would reward two parent households.²⁵

²³ H. Sparks ‘Queens, Teens, and Model Mothers’ in *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, p.176.

²⁴ J. Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945-1965*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); R. Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White*; M. Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America*, (Philadelphia; University of Philadelphia Press, 2010).

²⁵ M. Chapman, *War on Welfare*, p.20.

Chappell, in agreement with Quadagno, argues that reformers in the 1960s sought to actively deracialize welfare rather than simply deracialize the perception of welfare. In keeping with their focus on the family wage, she argues that liberal reformers in the 1960s accepted the Moynihan Report which blamed poverty on the ‘deterioration of the Negro family’ and therefore sought to ‘fix black families’ by deracializing the family wage model which had excluded African American women and families because of racialized gender assumptions that portrayed black women as workers rather than mothers.²⁶

These accounts also add considerable depth to the more directly policy orientated accounts examined earlier. In particular, by exposing and interrogating the meta-narratives that structure and mediate the way that people understand welfare, these arguments are crucial to understanding the wider discourses within which the NWRO had to operate. However, both approaches tend to be more static in the way they conceptualize the welfare system and risk suggesting that certain discourses are so powerful or culturally hegemonic that they cannot be escaped or challenged. They also tend to mask the political contexts that shaped welfare reform debates and, in doing so, fail to consider the alternative courses that the welfare state could have taken. Instead they privilege a more deterministic narrative in which welfare policies were inevitably racist and sexist. Essentially a policy orientated approach deploys race and gender as analytical tools instead of considering them as identifying markers of particular groups in society and considers welfare recipients only so far as they were part of the state’s regulatory machine. As a result, by emphasizing the continuities in the hegemonic discourse on welfare, they necessarily present a more negative view of the welfare state that

²⁶ M. Chappell, *War on Welfare*, p.2.

risks positioning recipients as powerless victims of a continually racist and sexist state and underplays the ways in which welfare recipients were able to exercise agency. Policy orientated approaches then do not provide historians with the tools necessary to fully challenge the presiding discourse that claims that recipients are not capable of improving their own lives and blames them for their own poverty.

However, there are many other scholars who have sought to show the ways in which welfare recipients, primarily poor black women, have been able to challenge dominant narratives and specific policies. Their approach owes much to Nancy Naples foundational work, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work and the War on Poverty*, which adopts an explicitly feminist approach to understanding women's activism by foregrounding the voices and lived experiences of female activists. Her work embodies the feminist claim that lived experience is a valid basis for knowledge.²⁷ In *Grassroots Warriors* Naples is primarily concerned to gender the community activism that emerged during the War on Poverty. Writing in the 1990s, she speaks to a historiographical tradition that, as Linda Gordon also points out, did not attach any analytical importance to the overrepresentation of women among its subjects. Naples therefore focuses on recovering the voices of female community workers hired in Community Action Programs in Philadelphia and New York during the War on Poverty and analyzing what brought them to community activism. She argues that female activists were able to draw links between personal and collective injustices and that these formed the basis of their understandings of poverty. Drawing on Gramsci, she argues that

²⁷ N. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty*, (New York: Routledge, 1998).

these women should be seen as ‘organic intellectuals’ whose experiences served as a base of knowledge that fundamentally shaped their activism.²⁸

Many later works, including this thesis, have been grounded in a feminist methodology that validates experiential knowledge. Grassroots approaches, in particular, take people and places as crucial to understanding welfare. In this work, the welfare state is conceptualized as a network of organizations and people which spreads out from the center into diverse localities and interacts with welfare recipients directly. In doing so, it challenges a ‘top down’ narrative that reads policies as the primary focus of welfare scholarship and instead emphasizes the array of welfare state apparatus that recipients encountered on a day to day basis. There is not space in this introduction to consider the full range of vibrant literature that explores the grassroots activism of welfare recipients. However, it is possible to highlight some of the key themes that emerge. In particular, one extremely valuable tendency among recent historiography has been to use a case study based approach to examine grassroots organizing of welfare recipients on a local level.²⁹

Annelise Orleck’s detailed study of welfare rights in Las Vegas, *Storming Caesar’s Palace*, provides a particularly compelling example. It explores the 25 year existence of Operation Life in Nevada and demonstrates how the welfare mothers behind Operation Life were able to exercise real control in their relationship with the welfare state and, at points, create a system that really worked to help welfare recipients.³⁰ Challenging the ‘top down’ periodization that views the 1980s as bereft of welfare rights activism, Orleck highlights how Operation Life

²⁸ N. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors*, p.180.

²⁹ For good examples see: A. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington D.C.*, (Urbana; University of Illinois Press, 2008); A. Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought their Own War on Poverty*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); L. Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia*, (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

³⁰ A. Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace*,

forced the state government to implement federal programs like the Food Stamps Program and the Women and Infant Child Nutrition Program in this decade. Moreover, welfare activists not only built a library and a medical centre in the community but also ran and administered these programs themselves, providing meaningful jobs for welfare mothers.³¹ Although she also recounts the slow demise of Operation Life in the 1990s, Orleck suggests that the model of welfare that these activists adopted could work on a larger scale if the government was willing to trust poor women to make their own decisions. In their own ways, Lisa Levenstein and Anne Valk, like Annelise Orleck, also successfully demonstrate that welfare policies were not simply imposed by the federal and state governments but that welfare recipients themselves shaped these policies.

However, while these accounts are extremely rich in their depictions of welfare rights activism, the difficulty with evaluating and building on a case study approach revolves around the question of generalizability. To what extent do the relationships among race, gender, and the welfare state in these individual case studies represent larger problems and solutions. To address this question, some historians have focused on the National Welfare Rights Organization. The two most recent and comprehensive accounts of the NWRO are Premilla Nadasen's 2005 book, *Welfare Warriors* and Felicia Kornbluh's 2007 book, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*. Both draw on Nancy Naples work and argue that welfare recipients must be treated as organic intellectuals whose experiential knowledge is both valid and central to understanding the history of welfare in the United States. However, the two scholars adopt very different narrative framings for understanding welfare recipients' activism. In *Welfare Warriors* Nadasen utilizes an explicitly black

³¹ *Ibid*, pp.3-5.

feminist framework. She argues that the welfare recipients involved in the NWRO developed a black feminist consciousness and their political activism emerged from their own lived experiences at the intersections of race, class and gender. In contrast, Kornbluh situates her analysis within the language of citizenship. Rather than argue that welfare mother exhibited or developed a specific consciousness based on their lived experiences as black women, Kornbluh argues that welfare rights organizers were motivated by their desire to claim their rights as American citizens and to share in American prosperity.³²

In keeping with these different framings the authors center on different elements of the NWRO. Kornbluh primarily focuses on the NWRO's campaigns for credit in stores like Sears and their legal campaigns for minimum standards and fair hearings across the US because she sees these efforts as exemplifying welfare mothers demands for their rights as American citizens.³³ In contrast, Nadasen focuses on the national leaders of the welfare rights movement and foregrounds their personalities and conflicts in order to show the growing feminist consciousness of welfare recipients.³⁴ However, her focus on growing internal tensions means that her analysis of the late 1960s and early 1970s tends to focus on the demise of the NWRO at the expense of considering its ongoing campaigns. As a result *Welfare Warriors* feels somewhat deterministic. For example, in direct contrast with Annelise Orleck's analysis of welfare activism in Nevada, Nadasen presents Operation Life as an example of the national staff acting 'regardless of the views of grassroots members'.³⁵ While the NWRO's decision to support Operation

³² P. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*, (New York: Routledge, 2005); F. Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007)

³³ F. Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*, pp.1-14.

³⁴ P. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, pp. xiv-xvi.

³⁵ A. Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace*; P. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, p.203.

Life undoubtedly did cause friction with some members who felt that other local organizations were equally worthy of attention, Nadasen's focus leads her to minimize the fact that Operation Life had a direct impact on the lives of many welfare recipients in Nevada and acted as a springboard for the formation of one of the most successful local welfare organizations in America.

Ultimately policy focused approaches to welfare history rightly point out the continuation of classed, raced, and gendered discourses around welfare and their pivotal role in shaping policy and, in doing so, allow historians to challenge the claim that the division between public assistance and social insurance is either natural or neutral. However, as the literature on grassroots activism suggests, this narrative provides only a partial perspective and does not consider the very real ways in which recipients' experiences of welfare changed over time nor does it recognize the ways in which recipients organized to demand recognition by the state. Grassroots historians capture the ways in which welfare recipients were able to exercise agency in their interactions with the state through national and local social movements and in their individual interactions with public assistance programs. But rarely can they fully explain the power of the state to meet these repeated challenges.

This thesis aims to bring these two literatures together by looking at motherhood and citizenship as important sites of political contestation for both welfare recipients and policymakers. In order to do so it will draw on a feminist tradition that recognizes that language is not fixed but instead a key part of political discourse. Eileen Boris argues that language must be understood in terms of

competing discourses or ‘competing ways of giving meaning to the world’.³⁶ In this sense, language is not simply descriptive of reality but instead it is partly constitutive. In terms of welfare reform, this thesis will argue that the discursive battle over what it meant to be a good mother or a good citizen actively created and constrained the options available to stakeholders. Nancy Fraser makes this point in her discussion of needs talk and the importance of need as a tool in political discourse.³⁷ Groups have to use their discursive resources to establish their definition of social needs as legitimate and themselves as authoritative in order to implement their policies. Concepts like motherhood and citizenship cannot therefore be seen as fixed or ahistorical but instead are socially constructed in particular political, cultural and economic contexts. Their meaning only becomes apparent within a specific discursive context: in this case, the activism of the NWRO and the lived experiences of welfare recipients at the intersections of class, race and gender in American society.

Feminist scholarship has long emphasized the constructed nature of supposedly neutral and universal ideas like motherhood. Scholars like Evelyn Nakano Glenn have compellingly argued that motherhood is actually a ‘socially constructed relationship and institution shaped by men and women’s actions and wider social and cultural paradigms’.³⁸ As such it can be marshaled in support of contradictory agendas, as occurred in the debate over a guaranteed adequate income, where claims to protect motherhood were deployed by both the NWRO and by policymakers. In this case, motherhood and citizenship become important

³⁶ E. Boris, ‘The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the “Political”’, *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 25 (1989-1990), pp.27-28.

³⁷ N. Fraser, ‘Struggle Over Needs: Outline of a Socialist-Feminist Critical Theory of Late-Capitalist Political Culture’ in *Women, the State and Welfare*, ed. L. Gordon, (Madison; The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp.199-225.

³⁸ E. Nakano Glenn, ‘Introduction’, in *Mothering Ideology, Experience & Agency*, eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.4.

sites of political disagreement between distinct groups of political actors. Analyzing the debate over a guaranteed adequate income in terms of these competing discourses therefore provides a way of understanding the welfare state that bridges the divide between policy and grassroots approaches. It also recognizes how racialized and gendered policies have trapped women in poverty, and the ways that women, and women of color particularly, have exercised agency in order to try and access the resources to which they are entitled. In essence, this approach allows historians to remap the welfare rights movement and to analyze it not as a series of separate arenas but, as Steven Lawson said of the civil rights movement, as a group of ‘overlapping spheres sharing a common segment’.³⁹

Furthermore, I believe that any feminist analysis of the welfare state and its relationship to welfare rights movements must take as central the fact that most AFDC and TANF recipients are poor single mothers and that an increasing percentage are poor single mothers of color. As such this project will adopt an intersectional approach that recognizes that race, sex, and class cannot be separated and that women of color experience oppression specifically as women of color, not as women and as people of color. In her work on intersectionality, Kimberle Crenshaw has thoroughly and compellingly critiqued an additive model of identity that sees racial and gendered oppressions as separable.⁴⁰ Such a model fails to expose the specificities of black women’s experiences as black women rather than as women who are black or blacks who are women. Crenshaw instead proposes intersectionality in an attempt to reconceptualize singular identity categories that further marginalize certain groups and to try and address ‘the problematic

³⁹ S. Lawson, ‘Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement’, *The American Historical Review*, April 1991, p. 466.

⁴⁰ K. Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, p.139.

consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis'.⁴¹ Since Crenshaw wrote her seminal piece on intersectionality, it has become one of the key paradigms that feminists, and others, have deployed in order to conceptualize the ways in which race, gender, class and sexuality intersect and to argue that oppression cannot be studied along a singular axis – be it race, class or gender.

These critiques are particularly relevant to this project given that the majority of NWRO members were poor women of color and that such women have been at the center of much of the media backlash against programs like AFDC. Indeed tropes like the 'welfare queen' are racialized and gendered in ways that cannot be understood solely from a race based or gender based analysis. Equally, the language and rhetoric that the NWRO deployed in its campaign against FAP, as will become clear, cannot be understood through a race first or gender first analysis but requires an intersectional approach. NWRO activists themselves were aware of the intersectional position that they occupied in society. In an interview with *Ms Magazine* in 1972, Johnnie Tillmon, then chief executive of the NWRO, wrote: 'I'm a woman. I'm a black woman. I'm a poor woman. I'm a fat woman. I'm a middle aged woman. And I'm on welfare. In this country, if you're any one of those things – poor, black, fat, female, middle aged, on welfare – you count less as a human being. If you're all those things, you don't count at all. Except as a statistic. I am a statistic'.⁴² This thesis will therefore argue that it is crucial to understand how the social locations and intersectional identities of welfare

⁴¹ K. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection", *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, p.139

⁴² Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare is a Women's Issue", *Ms.*, Spring 1972, reprinted in *Welfare: A Documentary History of US Policy and Politics*, eds. Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger, (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 373.

recipients shaped the way in which they mobilized ideas around motherhood and citizenship and why their reclamation of these identities was so radical.

Ultimately, this thesis will examine how contested discourses on motherhood and citizenship positioned the bodies of poor mothers of color. It will interrogate how policymakers, the NWRO and local welfare rights groups used motherhood and citizenship as discursive resources to establish their own interpretations of social needs as legitimate and argue that, for all three groups, defining what it meant to be a good mother or a good citizen was a crucial political battle. In order to do so, it relies heavily on archival sources and, in particular, on the organizational records, personal correspondence and newspaper articles preserved in the George Wiley Papers, the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organizations Papers, and the Nick Kotz papers. Reading these three archives in conversation with each other and in conversation with the Congressional Record has enabled me to document the activities of welfare rights organizations at all levels of society from small scale sit-ins at local branches of Sears, to demonstrations outside state courthouses, to national lobbying efforts against President Nixon's Family Assistance Plan. Furthermore, the Kotz papers contain transcripts of numerous interviews with welfare rights activists. Through these transcripts, I have been able to integrate the voices of the women involved in the NWRO into my analysis and allow their voices to shape my argument. However, in doing so, I have tried to remain aware that these interviews, like all other sources, were not created to answer my questions specifically and, as such, must be analyzed critically and with awareness of the dynamics of power involved in the interview process.

The first chapter examines the wider political discourse that formed the backdrop to the debate over a guaranteed income. The following three chapters then explore the ways in which motherhood and citizenship were used, respectively, by policymakers, by the NWRO and by local welfare rights organizations. The second chapter analyzes how policymakers drew on the wider political discourses discussed in chapter one in order to win support for the introduction of the Family Assistance Plan and how other legislators sought to subvert this discourse in order to radically rewrite the welfare state. Adopting a feminist praxis that treats recipients as organic intellectuals and their experiential knowledge as central to understanding welfare, the third and fourth chapters then examine the ways in which welfare recipients used discourses around motherhood and citizenship to challenge the Family Assistance Plan and to argue for a more fundamental reform of the welfare system. It suggests that at both national and grassroots levels their use of these discourses was fundamentally shaped by their own intersectional identities. However, the sources make clear that local welfare rights organizations were more deeply invested in personal empowerment than the NWRO and, as such, used motherhood and citizenship to transform welfare recipients own identities as well as to challenge the state's legislative agenda. Together these chapters argue that for policymakers deploying these discourses helped them to further their own legislative agendas and to circumscribe the options available to their opponents, while for welfare rights activists, successfully contesting definitions of motherhood and citizenship fundamentally transformed their own identities and enabled them, for at least a limited period, to make their voices heard and successfully make claims on the state.

'Americans have long been trained to have a conditional reflex when they hear the word "welfare". It automatically conjures up not a friendly, indulgent image of hapless children, cripples and beleaguered mothers, but a repellent cartoon of a big, blowzy, lazy oaf who prefers handouts to an honest day's work.'

Clayton Pritchard, 'The Shadowy Politics of Welfare', September 11 1971⁴³

I. The Discursive Setting: The Backdrop to Debating a Guaranteed Adequate Income

The main body of this thesis will analyze the relationship between motherhood and citizenship in discourses on welfare in the early 1970s. This analysis will focus on debates in three different arenas and at three different levels: federal welfare policy, NWRO campaigns and local grassroots activism. However, to understand the significance of these discourses it is first necessary to examine the wider culture from which they drew their narrative frames. This chapter will explore the political culture within which the campaign for a guaranteed adequate income took place. In doing so, it will analyze the discursive landscape on to which President Nixon introduced the Family Assistance Plan. It will also explore the relationship between welfare rights and other contemporaneous social movements and the assumptions about race, class and gender that shaped ideas about motherhood, citizenship and the welfare state.

US welfare policy in the present is still classed, raced and gendered, and motherhood remains particularly contested ground. At the same time over the last thirty years concrete welfare reform proposals have shifted dramatically to the right. In the early 1970s, during a Republican administration, there were two separate bills under discussion in the House that would have mandated a basic level of income for all American families. In contrast, in the 1990s, a Democratic President

⁴³ C. Pritchard, 'The Shadowy Politics of Welfare', September 11 1971, in *Handout or Hand Up*, Washington Post Publications, 1972, Box 17, Nick Kotz Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

oversaw the dismantling of the minimal federal safety net; and in 2012 neither presidential candidate is likely to contemplate reversing this decision. In this political climate, it is easy to overlook the fundamental political objections that the NWRO marshaled against President Nixon's Family Assistance Plan and to accuse them of shortsightedness. As Felicia Kornbluh points out, the NWRO's contemporary critics, and many subsequent historians, have criticized the NWRO for its stance on FAP, arguing that the organization made a mistake in opposing a bill that enshrined in law the principle that the federal government had a duty to provide a basic income to poor families.⁴⁴ Yet the NWRO had valid political objections to both the level of tangible benefits that FAP would offer to their members and, more fundamentally, to the underlying logic and philosophy that was driving the bill forward. This chapter will examine the emergence of this underlying philosophy in more detail and suggest why using rhetoric around motherhood and citizenship to oppose FAP was such a radical choice for welfare rights activists.

The late 1960s and early 1970s are often seen as something of a transition period between the liberal policies of the 1960s and the rise of conservative rhetoric under President Reagan in the 1980s. Thus, although the specific image of the 'welfare queen' is traditionally associated with President Reagan, it is important to recognize that the 1960s and 1970s were not free from such racialized and gendered stereotypes. Indeed, the rise of the black cultural pathology paradigm and the image of the black matriarch can be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s and the writings of sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier. Frazier's seminal work, *The Negro Family in the United States*, provided the foundation on which later debates about black matriarchy were built, including the claim that bad mothers were responsible for the

⁴⁴ F. Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*, p.159.

ruin of black families.⁴⁵ While this narrative has traditionally been associated with more conservative political rhetoric, Jennifer Mittelstadt's work on the welfare state in the 1930s and 1940s demonstrates how even liberal reformers like Elizabeth Wickenden and Wilbur Cohen integrated the black cultural pathology paradigm into their policies. She argues that once it became clear that Congress would not pass a comprehensive social welfare bill, Cohen, and other liberal reformers embraced the idea of a dichotomy between 'fundamental poverty' and 'situational poverty' and refocused their reform efforts on the latter. They argued that this second type of poverty was caused by long standing personal problems, such as a lack of education, rather than unexpected or temporary setbacks and therefore required active intervention by the state to resolve. As a result, they put rehabilitation at the center of their welfare proposals and introduced policy ideas which sought to compel recipients of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) to tackle the problems that kept them in poverty.⁴⁶ This approach singled out ADC recipients as the primary group in need of rehabilitation. In doing so it reinforced the divide between culturally acceptable social insurance programs and increasingly unpopular and stigmatized "welfare programs." It also tightened the connection in the public mind between welfare and poor single women of color by refusing to actively challenge the racial discrimination present in the welfare system and instead attempting to erase race from the public discourse around welfare entirely.⁴⁷

Reformers in the 1930s and 1940s sowed the seeds for later welfare policies to be constructed on the idea that poverty was a personal failing and compulsory rehabilitation was the necessary solution. However, it was not until the publication of the infamous Moynihan Report in the mid 1960s that the racialized and gendered

⁴⁵ R. Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White*, p.22.

⁴⁶ J. Mittelstadt, *Welfare to Workfare*, p.2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.16.

nature of this discourse became hegemonic. The Moynihan Report, officially titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, argued that poverty among African Americans was not primarily the result of structural or institutional racism but instead the result of the collapse of African American families into a ‘tangle of pathology’ in which black women usurped the rightful position of black men.⁴⁸ Moynihan argued that slavery had ‘forced the Negro community into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole’.⁴⁹ This matriarchy was not to be found across the whole of the African American community but was particularly prevalent among the lower classes where the ‘fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated’.⁵⁰ It argued that if President Johnson was truly committed to ending poverty then ‘a national effort towards the problems of Negro Americans must be directed towards the question of family structure.’⁵¹ Essentially Moynihan argued that the aim of the activist welfare state should be to intervene in African American communities to recreate families in the patriarchal, male breadwinner model rather than to create large scale universal social welfare programs that would encourage black mothers to continue raising their children alone. This report cemented the black cultural pathology paradigm and became a crucial touchstone for both liberal and conservative anti-poverty activists and for those politicians looking to introduce welfare reform bills during the 1960s and 1970s.

Moynihan’s influence is particularly clear in the underlying logic of the War on Poverty, which formed the immediate policy backdrop to the introduction of the

⁴⁸ D. Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for Action", US Department of Labor, accessed August 13th 2012, <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.html>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

⁵¹ *Ibid*

Family Assistance Plan. The War on Poverty has long been maligned by historians as symbolic of the failings of the liberal antipoverty strategy that sought to expand central government outwards as it created policy initiatives to tackle poverty. Certainly, as Annelise Orleck acknowledges, ‘from a ‘top down’ perspective the ‘antipoverty crusade’s failures can seem glaring and its successes insignificant’.⁵² However, Orleck and other recent scholars of the antipoverty movement have increasingly sought to challenge this perspective. To do so, they have focused on grassroots activism and the immediate impact antipoverty initiatives had on local communities. They have sought to demonstrate that while the antipoverty movement had its weaknesses and failures, it also achieved critical successes and provided poor women in particular with the political space and the funding to make tangible changes in their communities.⁵³

Analyzing the relationship between welfare rights and the war on poverty supports this less pessimistic assessment of the antipoverty movement. Certainly, the war on poverty was both driven by and limited by the underlying philosophy of the Moynihan report which argued that the poor remained poor because they were trapped in a culture of poverty.⁵⁴ While federal policy makers did not advocate implementing structural changes to the economy and the welfare system, they did embrace Richard Cloward’s ‘opportunity theory’ which focused on empowering communities to help themselves. However, as the testimony of welfare recipients and community activists demonstrates, they failed to commit fully to this approach and clearly did not intend to politicize or empower welfare mothers specifically. For example, the Virginia Welfare Rights Organization (VWRO), which was

⁵² A. Orleck, ‘Introduction’, *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History – 1964-1980*, eds. A. Orleck, L Gayle Hazirjian, (London: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), p.4.

⁵³ See articles in *War on Poverty*, eds. A. Orleck, L Gayle Hazirjian.

⁵⁴ A. Orleck, ‘Introduction’, *War on Poverty*, p.22.

staffed by paid OEO organizers, recounts explicit threats from OEO officials to withdraw funding from a community action program if it continued to organize welfare recipients.⁵⁵

Still, even if the War on Poverty did not set out to politicize welfare mothers, it is clear that the relationship between the two was very complex. The most crucial provision in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 for understanding how the War on Poverty impacted welfare recipients is Title II. This set up the Office of Economic Opportunity and established the requirement that Community Action Programs (CAPS) must have ‘maximum feasible participation of residents in the areas and members of the groups’ served by the program.⁵⁶ While the War on Poverty has been severely criticized for failing to live up to this maxim, it is clear that the inclusion of this clause allowed existing welfare rights groups to make use of the increased resources that the federal government made available. CAPS thus served as a ‘channel of politicization and political organization’ for many welfare recipients.⁵⁷

Jeannette Washington, Etta Horn and Rhoda Linton, all important figures within the NWRO and the broader welfare rights movement, recall starting their community activism in OEO sponsored projects. Rhoda Linton, an organizer in New York City recalls that in 1967, when she first became involved in community organizing, ‘poverty programs were opened up’ and happy to work with welfare recipients. Local welfare rights organization records similarly demonstrate that many welfare rights groups were run by OEO paid staff and VISTA volunteers,

⁵⁵ VWRO Newsletter, December 1970, Folder 3, Box 27, George Wiley Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

⁵⁶ Quoted in M. Davis, *Brutal Need: Lawyers and the Welfare Rights Movement, 1960-1973*, (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1995), p.32

⁵⁷ G. Martin, *The Emergence and Development of a Social Movement Organization among the Underclass: A case study of the NWRO*, 1972, Folder 5, Box 22, Wiley Papers.

albeit often to the frustration of welfare mothers themselves. However, this funding was extremely important and when the state threatened to withdraw it, welfare rights groups reacted angrily and accused the antipoverty movement of failing to live up to its own rhetoric. VWRO organizers wrote that ‘traditional poverty programs have not in any measure helped the “maximum feasible” number of poor. Welfare rights is doing just that. Instead of OEO living up to its commitment to poor people, it is now trying to destroy what we have helped them gain’.⁵⁸

As the above exchange suggests, the relationship between the OEO and welfare rights groups and activists was complicated, and welfare recipients were not unquestioning supporters of the OEO or the War on Poverty. Indeed Johnnie Tillmon, in her testimony against FAP in 1970, stated that ‘sometimes we feel that we are like... urban prostitutes...A lot of people make money off us. Anybody can draw up a proposal and present it to HEW and the health people and the OEO people and say they are going to do something for the poor’.⁵⁹ As Nancy Fraser argues, the growing absorption of welfare programs into government bureaucracy had positioned welfare mothers as ‘potential recipients of predefined services rather than as agents involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions’.⁶⁰ With the growth of local community antipoverty programs welfare recipients were increasingly aware that the state did not prioritize their needs and that they were not considered legitimate stakeholders in defining these needs. At the same time, they had growing access to resources that were intended to be directed at other social issues like hunger, inadequate healthcare and poor education, which were all assumed to be entangled with the culture of poverty.

⁵⁸ VWRO Newsletter, Folder 3, Box 27, Wiley Papers

⁵⁹ J. Tillmon, NWRO Testimony, Special Hearings on HR16311, 18th November 1970, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

⁶⁰ N. Fraser, ‘Struggle over Needs’, *Women, the State, and Welfare*, p.212.

While the public imagination distinguishes between “welfare” programs like AFDC and other publically funded institutions like hospitals, schools and courts, the needs of welfare recipients are multifaceted, and most recipients come into contact with all of these public institutions. In this context, welfare recipients were well positioned to demand resources from the state. For example, in her work on the War on Poverty, Laurie Green explores how the Memphis Area Project South (MAP South), led primarily by poor African American women like Barbara McKinney, collaborated with a local hospital to study childhood malnutrition. While Green does not fully examine the relationship between race, motherhood and welfare, she does compellingly demonstrate how such women successfully challenged the assumption that infant malnutrition was primarily caused by bad mothering and neglect and instead ‘recast malnutrition as a catastrophic childhood illness’.⁶¹ Their activism led the government to institute a pilot malnutrition program in Memphis which was then expanded to a national program in 1972, under the name of Women and Infant Children Nutrition Program (WIC), one of the few remaining successful federal antipoverty programs.⁶²

Ultimately, interactions between welfare recipients and antipoverty initiatives demonstrate that the relationship between the state and grassroots groups is not unidirectional. The state could not simply impose its will on local communities nor did its priorities or ideologies manifest themselves entirely as the state intended. Instead, by creating space for local activism the War on Poverty entered into a fierce, albeit unequally weighted, battle for control with local activists who had their own priorities and ideas. As a result, despite not being the target audience of the War on Poverty, community action programs clearly helped

⁶¹ L. Green, ‘Saving Babies in Memphis: The Politics of Race, Health, and Hunger during the War on Poverty’ in *War on Poverty*, eds. A. Orleck, L Gayle Hazirjian, p.212.

⁶² L. Green, *Ibid*, p.134.

welfare recipients to gain experience in organizing and interacting with the state, which then led them to form welfare rights organizations. Indeed, OEO antipathy towards welfare recipients undoubtedly drove them to form distinct WROs and not to rely on the support of CAPs and VISTA volunteers. Essentially, the War on Poverty challenged the passive relationship between welfare recipients and government bureaucracy and provided space for welfare mothers to fight to establish their definitions of their needs as legitimate.

To understand why the War on Poverty did not seek to empower welfare mothers, despite its insistence on maximum feasible participation of the poor, and how this shaped the debate over welfare reform proposals in the early 1970s, it is necessary to examine the nature of motherhood itself and its relationship with race, class and gender in this period. Although motherhood is still largely situated as natural or neutral in contemporary culture, feminist scholarship has compellingly demonstrated that motherhood is far from a universal experience. Instead, motherhood is a socially constructed relationship and institution that is historically and culturally specific and its meaning and implications are distinctly raced and classed. While one specific model of 'good' motherhood may have been culturally dominant through much of the twentieth century in the United States, this model has never represented the lived experiences of all, or even most, mothers. Nor has it remained uncontested. As the introduction suggests, motherhood has always been contested territory within discourses around welfare. Since the establishment of mother's pensions in the early twentieth century, welfare payments have depended upon the ability of women to prove that they represent the ideal of good motherhood and are therefore deserving of state assistance. As Johnnie Tillmon wrote, 'from the very beginning, need was not enough to establish eligibility but

rather aid was confined to the “worthy” poor – a concept with moral overtones and which focused on...whether the mother was a proper and competent custodian of her children’.⁶³

While this socially constructed ideal of good motherhood has always been essentialized as the white, middle class, Anglo-American, stay at home mom, the language used to underpin this image is historically contingent. In the 1960s and 1970s the discourse around motherhood and welfare was fundamentally shaped by the Moynihan Report and by the assumption that certain types of mothers posed dangers to the American state. As Ruth Feldstein argues: ‘representations of women as mothers developed in conjunction with debates about who was a healthy citizen and what was a healthy democracy’.⁶⁴ Drawing on a psychosocial definition of citizenship, American liberals argued that bad mothers raised bad citizens and that it was therefore in the state’s interests to enforce good motherhood. While Feldstein demonstrates how mothers of all races were blamed, this demonization took on specific racialized and classed forms in debates around welfare. In particular, interwoven with the Moynihan Report and its focus on black cultural pathology, mother blaming allowed American liberals to ignore structural racism and instead make ‘the “bad mother” the personification of pathology within the liberal welfare state’ and, more generally, to render ‘black women’s maternal failure’ as a code for ‘racial inferiority more generally’.⁶⁵ This is a particularly important discourse to consider in relation to NWRO activism because it was against this narrative of motherhood and citizenship that welfare rights activists sought to construct a different narrative about what counted as good mothering and therefore implicitly

⁶³ J. Tillmon, ‘Welfare is a Woman’s Issue’, NWRO Public Statements on FAP, 1969-1973, Folder 3, Box 17, Wiley Papers.

⁶⁴ Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White*, p.1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.14.

good citizenship. As chapters 5 and 6 will demonstrate, NWRO activists subverted this psychosomatic narrative of motherhood and citizenship to argue for greater financial support from the state on the grounds that they were producing good citizens even though they were contesting its validity of the paradigm itself.

Indeed, it was against the cultural backdrop of the Moynihan Report and mother blaming discourses that welfare rights organizations began to form. To understand why they emerged in this particular moment, given that the hegemonic discourse on welfare denied welfare mothers the right to define their own needs or to make their own choices, it is necessary to look in more detail at the relationship between welfare and other contemporary social movements. Welfare rights organizations did not generally remain within community action program frameworks: in some cases the OEO successfully withdrew funding, in others welfare rights activists broke away from existing CAPs to form distinct welfare rights organizations, like the Brooklyn Welfare Action Council. Instead these organizations embraced a more directly oppositional stance, directly challenging the legitimacy of federal and state governments to dictate their needs to them. As Nancy Fraser suggests, marginalized groups often form these '*subaltern counterpublics*' or 'parallel discursive arenas' within which 'members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs'.⁶⁶ In the case of welfare rights organizations it is clear that while the War on Poverty and its support for participant-led community programs helped groups to form, both the civil rights movement and the emerging women's movement also influenced activists and helped to radicalize them.

⁶⁶ N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, 1990, pp.67-68.

In the past, social movement histories have tended to minimize the importance of intersectionality and treat the war on poverty, civil rights, feminism and welfare rights as distinct movements which can be broken down into singular identity based political movements focusing on class, race or gender. However, as Anne Valk shows in her work on Washington DC, these movements were interconnected and activists participating in one movement were very often also involved in others.⁶⁷ This intersectional approach to social movements is particularly important for understanding welfare rights activism as the overwhelming majority of activists were poor single mothers of color who participated in or had connections to, all of these movements and whose involvement in welfare rights was often shaped by their exclusion from the mainstream concerns dominating civil rights, feminism and the war on poverty. By examining welfare rights connections with the civil rights movement and the women's movement, we can build a clearer sense of how welfare recipients themselves experienced community activism and how these experiences shaped their response to the Family Assistance Plan.

The connections between the civil rights movement and welfare rights are many and obvious. George Wiley had originally worked for CORE before starting the NWRO and he claimed that the NWRO had been spearheaded by a 'band of erstwhile civil rights activists' who saw the potential in organizing a nationwide grassroots movement around welfare.⁶⁸ Wiley clearly brought his experience in the civil rights movement to his work at NWRO and he often made connections between the tactics civil rights campaigners used and those that welfare mothers could deploy. For example, at the NWRO founding convention in 1967 he argued

⁶⁷ A. Valk, *Radical Sisters*, pp.1-12.

⁶⁸ G. Wiley, 'The Nixon Family Assistance Plan: Reform or Repression', NWRO Public Statements on FAP, 1969-1973, Folder 3, Box 17, Wiley Papers.

that both movements had a 'very powerful tool to work with' because, just as state governments had been willfully flouting constitutional protections for African Americans, welfare departments had been actively ignoring the laws enshrining welfare recipients rights. As a result, organizers 'generally have the power of the constitution and the courts eventually on our side'.⁶⁹ This influence is clear on a local as well as national level. As with community action programs, local civil rights groups spurred the growth of distinct indigenous welfare rights groups that often predated the formation of the NWRO. For example, the WSO Welfare Union in Chicago grew directly out of civil rights groups in the area.⁷⁰ The civil rights movement provided a basis for common identification between African Americans and it contributed to a sense that discrimination should be challenged. However, the welfare rights movement also grew in part, like Black Power, out of frustrations with the civil rights movement and its failure to improve the economic prospects of poor black communities. Etta Horn, in an interview about the origins of the NWRO, said that it filled the gap that the civil rights movement did not address and in doing so operated 'beneath the lunch counter' for those who 'couldn't afford to eat there'.⁷¹

It is important to understand the connections between the civil rights and welfare rights movements because, as will be discussed later, it clearly influenced the language that welfare mothers deployed to fight FAP and shaped their particular constructions of motherhood and citizenship. However, while the majority of NWRO members were African American, the organization was not simply an offshoot of the civil rights or the black power movement. Instead the NWRO was

⁶⁹ G. Wiley, Speech at NWRO Founding Convention, Newark, New Jersey, 1967, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

⁷⁰ G. Martin, *Emergence and Development of a Social Movement*, Folder 5, Box 22, Wiley Papers.

⁷¹ Etta Horn, interview with Mary Lynn Kotz, 20th November 1974, Box 24, Kotz Papers.

committed to its multiracial position and repeatedly stressed that it operated on behalf of ‘all poor people...of any ethnic group and every ethnic group’.⁷² As the literature review suggests, previous scholarship has nonetheless tended to ignore this multiracial element in welfare organizing and has instead perpetuated an understanding of race that centers on a black/white binary. Ultimately, the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement both helped to encourage the growth of welfare rights organizations because they opened up political space for welfare recipients to coalesce and organize. Yet they failed to address fully the intersectional needs of welfare recipients.

In contrast, the women’s movement was less directly influential on grassroots welfare organizations, even though it confronted other kinds of discrimination faced by women. Instead, the NWRO and local WROs formed a number of uneasy adhoc alliances with women’s organizations to address common concerns. Fundamentally, many middle class feminists and activists had a complex relationship with motherhood, work and citizenship that sometimes led them into conflict with the NWRO and welfare mothers. This is clear from Johnnie Tillmon’s testimony during 1968 Congressional hearings on income maintenance programs. In the hearings Tillmon disagrees with Democratic and self-described feminist Congresswoman Martha Griffiths. Griffiths justifies work requirements on the grounds that work is liberating for women and that ‘if you do not say anything about mothers working, then they [the Department of Labor] are going to see to it that none work. They are not going to be given any chance to work’. In contrast, Tillmon draws attention to the fears of welfare mothers based in their own experiences of the jobs available in a racist and sexist labor market. She argues

⁷² G. Wiley, Statement to NWRO Staff, Saturday August 2nd 1969, Box 13, Kotz Papers.

mothers do not want to be ‘pushed into doing housework’ or ‘going out and cleaning Mrs. A’s kitchen’ and that they do not need counseling sessions but ‘concrete programs’ to help recipients move off welfare permanently.⁷³ For politicians like Congresswoman Griffiths, work is liberatory and choice is important. In contrast, as Johnnie Tillmon explains, ‘for poor women the issues of women’s liberation are issues of survival....it is difficult to see how any woman has “a choice” whether to work or stay home with her children. To speak of choice...is a hoax’.⁷⁴ The following three chapters show that in this discursive setting blending rhetoric around motherhood and citizenship and using it to contest their right to define their own legitimate social needs was a radical strategy wielded by welfare recipients; and that for at least some time, they were able to create space to make their voices heard.

⁷³ “A Feminist Congresswoman spars with Welfare Rights Activists”, reprinted in *Welfare in the United States: A History With Documents, 1936-1996*, eds. Premilla Nadasen, Jennifer Mittelstadt and Marisa Chappell, (New York: Routledge 2009), 155;156.

⁷⁴ J. Tillmon, ‘Welfare is a Woman’s Issue’, Folder 3, Box 17, Wiley Papers.

'Now the way I see it / These other folks are the fools / They're working and paying taxes / Just to send my young'uns through school / But things are still gonna get better yet/At least that's what I understand/They tell me this new President/ has put in a whole new poverty plan'.

Welfare Cadillac, Guy Drake, 1970⁷⁵

II. Debating a Guaranteed Adequate Income: Congress, the President and The Family Assistance Plan

Building on the discussion in the previous chapter, this chapter will focus on analyzing the role of motherhood and citizenship in the discourse around welfare reform in the legislative arena. It will look at Congressional debates, Senate hearings and public speeches on the Family Assistance Plan and the Adequate Income Act and assess how President Nixon, Senator McCarthy and other politicians sought to construct images of mothers and citizens that furthered their own legislative agendas. Highlighting the links between these constructions and the wider political discourse on welfare discussed previously, it will argue that the use of motherhood and citizenship was crucial to all stakeholders in the debate on a guaranteed adequate income because it was through these narrative frames that legislators sought to legitimate their reforms and that welfare rights activists contested their policies.

It is important to recognize that Congress itself was a fragmented body that did not construct a singular or universally agreed upon discourse around welfare. That two such different bills as the FAP and the AIA could be debated over two sessions and, despite extensive discussion, fail to gain enough support for passage makes clear that even the basic idea of a guaranteed adequate income did not have universal support in Congress. Differing understandings of what it meant to be a good mother or a good citizen were deeply embedded in the disagreements among politicians and part of their inability to pass legislation was their failure to reconcile

⁷⁵ G. Drake, 'Welfare Cadillac', in *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents, 1935-1996*, eds. P. Nadasen, J. Mittelstadt, M. Chappell, (New York; Routledge, 2009), p.166.

these different assumptions. This chapter will therefore map the existing linguistic terrain that welfare rights activists had to navigate when challenging the hegemonic discourse on welfare and consider how this terrain contributed to politician's ultimate failure to implement a national guaranteed income system.

The idea of a guaranteed income had already emerged within the wider discourse around welfare when President Nixon came to power. In 1968, 1300 American economists signed a petition asking Congress to adopt some form of national system of income guarantees.⁷⁶ Economists on the political left and right signed the petition, including those, like Milton Friedman and Henry Wallach, who were close to President Nixon. The principle had also been seriously considered by President Johnson. In 1968 he established the Heineman Commission to investigate different income maintenance proposals. Although the committee did not issue their report until November 1969, a few months after President Nixon had introduced the Family Assistance Plan, their recommendations for a bill were similar in many respects to FAP. In addition, simmering urban discontent in the late 1960s gave the welfare reform debate an added sense of urgency. Riots in cities like Newark, New Jersey and Watts, California sparked fears of mass uprisings in poor black communities. Building on the Moynihan Report and the paradigm of black cultural pathology, politicians and journalists argued that the riots were caused by the collapse of the black family and the tangle of pathology in low income African American communities. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, established in response to the riots, actively linked the riots to the failures of the welfare system, arguing that “the present system of public assistance contributes materially to the tensions and social disorganization that

⁷⁶ J. Quadagno, *Color of Welfare*, p.121.

have led to civil disorders". It recommended the introduction of a guaranteed income to replace existing welfare programs, hoping that it would encourage young black men to settle down and form stable relationships and thus lessen social discontent in urban communities.⁷⁷

It was against the backdrop of this concern about black matriarchy and its relationship with urban riots that the Family Assistance Plan was initially proposed by President Nixon on August 8, 1969 in a live televised address.⁷⁸ In addition to the FAP, a range of other bills were also introduced in the 91st and 92nd Congress' that would have implemented some form of guaranteed income system. Many of these bills, including the Ribicoff Amendments and Harris' bill, were attempts by moderate Senators to mediate the growing rift between President Nixon and liberal Senators who were unwilling to support what they saw as an increasingly conservative and punitive bill. Two of these bills were particularly crucial as indicators of popular discourse and policy alternatives. The first was Nixon's FAP, which would have guaranteed American families a yearly income of at least \$1600 and established a 'basic Federal floor so that children in any state can have at least the minimum essentials of life'.⁷⁹ The second bill, the Adequate Income Act (AIA), introduced by Senator Eugene McCarthy at the urging of the National Welfare Rights Organization, would have provided 'a minimum adequate income for a family of four of \$5500'.⁸⁰ Tracing the evolution of these bills through the 91st Congress and into the 92nd, when FAP was reintroduced as HR1 and Senator

⁷⁷ National Commission on Civil Disorder Report, Box 13, Kotz Papers.

⁷⁸ Jill Quadagno, "Race, Class and Gender in the US Welfare State: Nixon's Failed Family Assistance Plan", *American Sociological Review*, 1990, p.17.

⁷⁹ President Nixon, "Welfare Reform: Shared Responsibility", August 8 1969, *Welfare: A Documentary History*, p.318.

⁸⁰ Senator Eugene McCarthy, "The NWRO Bill", *Welfare Fighter*, June 1970.

George McGovern proposed AIA, illuminates the dynamic relations among concepts of motherhood, citizenship and public welfare.

FAP and the AIA represent two ends of the political spectrum in terms of guaranteed adequate income bills. Advocates of FAP emphatically denied that it was a guaranteed income. In his testimony to the House Committee on Ways and Means, Robert Finch, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, claimed that FAP was ‘not a guaranteed annual income. It does not guarantee benefits to persons regardless of their attitudes; its support is reserved for those who are willing to support themselves’.⁸¹ Instead it situated itself within the hegemonic discourse around welfare that portrayed poverty as a result of individual failings and family breakdown and as such only targeted families. In its later incarnation as HR1 the bill was even more expressly punitive and included strict work requirements, family caps and provisions to force single mothers to aggressively pursue child support payments. In contrast, the AIA aimed to ‘provide an adequate income for all Americans, to assure to every person a decent standard of living with dignity, justice, and democracy’.⁸² It would have offered recipients a much higher annual income than FAP, but more importantly it would have extended coverage to all American citizens whether or not they had children. Unlike FAP, the only eligibility criterion for AIA was economic need, and the bill contained no family cap and only work incentives not work requirements.

While wider national and international events meant that FAP was abandoned by the Nixon administration in 1972 and that AIA never left the House, the turn of the decade represents a crucial moment in welfare history when the debate on the state’s obligations to provide for all its citizens had the potential to be

⁸¹ R. Finch, Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Testimony to the House Committee on Ways and Means, October 1969, Folder 11, Box 19, Wiley Papers.

⁸² Senator Eugene McCarthy, ‘Adequate Income Bill’, April 1970, Folder 2, Box 22, Wiley Papers.

radically redefined. AIA would have completely revolutionized the existing welfare system by abolishing the categorical approach that the Social Security Act of 1935 had embedded in federal policy. The Council for Urban Affairs had discussed recommending a similar universal approach but dismissed such a change as politically unnecessary on the grounds that recipients of benefits like Old Age Assistance and Aid to the Blind 'are generally not the sort of persons who critics of the welfare system have in mind'.⁸³ This dismissal demonstrates the radical potential that AIA had to destabilize existing frameworks for understanding and analyzing poverty. By subsuming all welfare programs into one singular benefit, AIA would have fundamentally challenged the negative link between welfare programs and single mothers of color that existed in the public imagination and undermined the argument that poverty in African American communities or in single parent households was different from the situational or temporary poverty that afflicted other communities.

The potential of the Family Assistance Plan to dramatically alter the existing structure of the welfare state is less straightforward. Marisa Chappell is right to argue that the philosophy of FAP supported rather than subverted the hegemonic discourse on poverty and welfare.⁸⁴ Its aim was to decrease the rates of family breakdown in poor communities by subsidizing two parent families and the working poor and to encourage young men to marry by providing them with the necessary income to support a family. In essence, Chappell and Jill Quadagno are correct to see FAP as designed to reduce the risk of further urban discontent by reconstructing the family wage system and extending it to African American

⁸³ Draft Report of the Council of Urban Affairs, April 4th 1969, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

⁸⁴ Marisa Chappell, *War on Welfare*.

families.⁸⁵ However, at the same time, FAP did have the potential to radically redefine the relationship between the state and welfare recipients. Unlike earlier or subsequent welfare reform bills, and in contrast to President Nixon's own rhetoric, the Family Assistance Plan was, in essence, a guaranteed income and would have established the right to such an income for all families in the United States. While this income was clearly materially inadequate, it would have dramatically changed the wage economy in the south.⁸⁶ More fundamentally, it would have represented recognition by the government that the federal government had an obligation to provide financially for all low income families. Furthermore, while AIA was never realistically likely to become legislation, the Family Assistance Plan very nearly did and was only narrowly defeated by a combination of conservative southern senators afraid of the dramatic implications it could have for the economy in the South and liberal senators who opposed the increasingly punitive amendments being attached to the bill.

The significance of the debate over FAP, AIA, and other guaranteed adequate income bills cannot be understood simply by looking at the tangible measures contained in each bill. While these provide undeniable insights into the history of welfare reform, they do not entirely explain the importance of this moment in terms of the possibility that it offered welfare recipients to redefine their position in society. Natalie Fousekis and Glenda Gilmore both criticize historians for their tendency to focus on the outcomes of struggles and to anticipate failure and forget that 'what is past to them was future to their subjects'.⁸⁷ Analyzing the language used by both sides during the debate provides an alternate way of

⁸⁵M. Chappell, *War on Welfare*, J. Quadagno, *Color of Welfare*.

⁸⁶J. Quadagno, 'Race, Class and Gender', in *American Sociological Review*, p.24.

⁸⁷N. Fousekis, *Demanding Child Care Women's Activism and the Politics of Welfare, 1940-71*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p.3.

exploring how policymakers understood poverty and the raced, classed and gendered discourses at play in their debates. The fight between welfare recipients and policymakers was contested on both a discursive and non-discursive level, and the NWRO in particular challenged the language that policymakers used as much as the policies themselves. For example, after President Nixon requested the song “Welfare Cadillac” to be performed at the White House, Mamie Wilson, chairman of the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization, publicly criticized him and questioned his commitment to genuine welfare reform, stating ‘that song is nothing but hate and lies – and he’s put the White House right behind that hate and those lies’.⁸⁸ To her, by endorsing the assumptions embedded in “Welfare Cadillac”, President Nixon undermined the aims of his policy initiatives. As Premilla Nadasen notes in her work on the welfare right movement, ‘discourse and ideology became particularly important in the politics of welfare’ because of the extent to which the state deliberately misrecognized welfare recipients and the disconnect between popular perceptions of welfare and the reality.⁸⁹ The language that policymakers deploy to describe welfare, then, is not divorced from the lived experiences of recipients but instead is constitutive of the universe within which they have to operate.

Throughout the campaign for a guaranteed adequate income, motherhood and citizenship were the key narrative frames employed by all the groups involved. As a social institution motherhood is intrinsically connected to social systems of power and domination.⁹⁰ While the pervasive influence of social and cultural expectations means that motherhood is never truly private, it is especially and

⁸⁸ M. Wilson, Letter to Radio WCOP, 13th April 1970, Folder 6, Box 2, Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁸⁹ P. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, p.xvi.

⁹⁰ A. Orleck, ‘Introduction’, in *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right*, Eds. A. Jetter, A. Orleck and D. Taylor, (Dartmouth; University Press of New England, 1997), pp.3-23.

uniquely public for welfare mothers, and low income mothers of color more generally, because their status as mothers directly ties them into state institutions.⁹¹ For welfare recipients, motherhood is part of the public arena and is judged a legitimate domain for state intervention in a way that it is rarely for middle class or upper class women, regardless of their other interactions with state institutions. This notion of a coercive state and its right to determine what counts as good mothering underpins much of the debate on the Family Assistance Plan. There was a shared assumption that it was necessary to shape welfare recipients into good mothers and productive citizens and that government policy was a legitimate way to achieve this goal. However, there was not a clear agreement on what it meant to be a good mother or how this could be reconciled with the belief that paid work was the defining criteria of a productive citizen. In the first half of the twentieth century, the ideal of the good mother had been fixed as the white, Anglo American, stay at home mom. This ideal had never applied to the majority of mothers, particularly mothers of color, who had always been forced either by legislative or economic imperative to undertake paid work. Yet, on a discursive level, as Ruth Feldstein has shown, this image remained culturally dominant.⁹²

However, by the early 1970s there was a growing acceptance of working mothers and an awareness that stay at home domesticity was not necessarily the only acceptable model of good motherhood. Feminists increasingly spoke out in favor of the liberatory potential of work and, women, both black and white, criticized the idea that full time motherhood was necessarily rewarding for all women. For example, Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* exposed the sterility at the heart of the middle class white American housewife; and Frances Beale, the

⁹¹ M. Ladd Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare and the State, 1890-1930*, (Illinois; University of Illinois, 1995), p.2.

⁹² R. Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White*.

black feminist and SNCC activist, dismissed full time motherhood as a ‘sterile existence’.⁹³ These shifts in cultural assumptions were also reflected in the legislative language of the Family Assistance Plan which no longer talked of the need to ‘maintain and strengthen family life’, as AFDC had done, but instead focused on providing ‘a basic level of financial assistance...to needy families with children in a manner which will encourage work, training, and self support’.⁹⁴ More explicitly, those who opposed FAP and supported more liberal guaranteed adequate income bills like AIA firmly embraced multiple models of motherhood and tried to create provisions for both stay at home and working mothers. They, like NWRO activists, argued that mothers should have the choice about whether to stay at home and raise their children or whether to go out to work to support them. As a result, they fundamentally opposed work requirements, which Senator McCarthy, in a speech against FAP, called a ‘modern version of the debtors prison’.⁹⁵ Instead these activists and politicians favored a supportive rather than coercive state which emphasized work incentives not requirements. However, within Congress this view remained in the minority and even Senator McGovern, who introduced the 1971 AIA bill in the 92nd Congress, refused to explicitly support its provisions.⁹⁶

Yet despite new arguments for giving mothers a choice whether to seek paid employment, the increasing focus on work in FAP was not a new phenomenon. There had long been work requirements on a state level and there had been some federal work requirements in place since 1962. However, in abolishing

⁹³ Quoted in P. Nadasen, ‘Expanding the Boundaries of the Women’s Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights’, *Feminist Studies*, 2002, p.278.

⁹⁴ Congressman Parren James Mitchell, ‘Welfare Reform’, *Congressional Record*, June 18th 1971, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

⁹⁵ Senator Eugene McCarthy, 2nd December 1970, Folder 16, Box 19, Wiley Papers.

⁹⁶ Senator George McGovern, Folder 1, Box 20, Wiley Papers.

AFDC, FAP would have ended any remaining illusion that welfare was designed to support single mothers and allow them to remain at home with their children. Yet even in its most punitive incarnation, FAP was not designed to force all mothers into the labor force. Instead it continued the stratification of mothers into those who deserved to stay home with their children and those who must be compelled to work to contribute to society. For example, although all mothers with children under six (or under three in HR1) were exempted from work requirements, in an attempt to encourage family stability, mothers where ‘the father or another adult male relative is in the home and is registered’ were exempted from registering themselves irrespective of the age of their children.⁹⁷

As this provision suggests, the idealized image of the stay at home mother had certainly not lost all of its political currency. It remained a potent image that legislators could invoke in order to further their specific political agendas. This is clear from the contemporaneous debate over the Comprehensive Childcare Development Act. The CCD was introduced to Congress by Representative John Brademas and passed the House and the Senate in 1971 before being vetoed by President Nixon the following year. Had the bill not been vetoed, it would have introduced a widespread federal daycare program that provided good quality education to preschool children of all social classes across the country and substantially improved conditions for single mothers. President Nixon professed his support for good quality childcare in debates over FAP and argued that ‘well designed childcare programs...can help to break the cycle of poverty’.⁹⁸ However, in his speech vetoing the CCD he argued that the proposal would ‘destroy families’

⁹⁷ ‘The Family Assistance Plan’, Box 13, Kotz Papers.

⁹⁸ ‘The Family Assistance Plan’, Folder 2, Box 18, Wiley Papers

and ‘diminish parental authority and involvement with their children’.⁹⁹ Invoking the idea of the sacred maternal bond, Nixon and others who opposed the CCD argued that children should grow up with their mothers and claimed that the CCD would have usurped a mother’s natural role.

As will be discussed below, President Nixon’s veto of the CCD was entangled with wider political concerns, particularly his need to win support among conservatives before the 1972 Presidential election. However, the gap between his rhetoric on childcare in FAP and his veto of the CCD also demonstrates more widely the classed and raced nature of discourses around motherhood. President Nixon could introduce childcare provisions through FAP uncontroversially because it was assumed that poor mothers of color would and should work. Their roles as mothers were not valued nor were the needs of their children. Even when acknowledging that good childcare could help tackle poverty, FAP stated, ‘however the lack of childcare at that level would not be a good cause for failure to take training’.¹⁰⁰ President Nixon could not support the CCD because it would have legitimated the right of all women to work and undermined the still powerful paradigm of the good mother whose duty it was to stay home and raise good citizens.

As its exemptions suggest, the Family Assistance Plan enforced differing and contradictory expectations on to poor mothers. Indeed, by providing exemptions for mothers in two parent households and work requirements for single mothers, it was able to attract support from legislators who took opposing views on working mothers. For example, in the Congressional Record for June 18 1971, which includes the House debate on welfare reform, both Congresswoman Leonor

⁹⁹ President Nixon, Speech on the Veto of the Comprehensive Childcare Development Act, 9th December 1971, Folder 2, Box 18, Wiley Papers.

¹⁰⁰ The Family Assistance Plan, Folder 2, Box 18, Wiley Papers.

Sullivan from Missouri and Congresswoman Martha Griffiths from Michigan stated their intention to vote for FAP, albeit in Sullivan's case reluctantly. Griffiths argued that she was voting for the bill because of it would give women the 'opportunity to work'. She stated that the present system allows women to make "immoral choices" by saying "to a wife, a mother of several children, "You may live with your husband or not and.. the rest of us will support you." This bill corrects that. That choice is not going to be offered anymore'.¹⁰¹ In contrast, Sullivan supported the bill because of its exemptions for mothers and its support of the two parent family. She argued that the 'family unit is the building block of our society' and that 'young children require the physical presence of a parental figure in the home at all times'. Her reluctance to support the bill stemmed partly from her concern about child malnourishment resulting from the abolition of the food stamp program. She feared that 'too much of the [welfare] check often went to cars and television sets and cigarettes and whisky and clothes for the adults, and very little of it went for food for the children'. Thus even though the two congresswomen took opposing stances on working mothers, the common thread in their support of FAP was their belief that welfare mothers are irresponsible and need to be compelled to behave in appropriate ways.¹⁰² Sullivan and Griffiths were united by their support for the underlying philosophy of FAP which relied on a culture of poverty narrative frame that blamed poor mothers for their children's poverty and positioned the state as responsible for rehabilitating such families. While they constructed distinctly different images of an ideal mother, in both cases motherhood remained a status denied to welfare recipients. Indeed the

¹⁰¹ Congresswoman Martha Griffiths, 'Welfare Reform', *Congressional Record*, June 18th 1971, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

¹⁰² Congresswoman Leonor Sullivan, 'Welfare Reform', *Congressional Record*, June 18th 1971, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

Congresswomen's images of a good mother were defined by the absence of welfare mothers. The role of the state, and of welfare specifically, was to control bad mothers and compel them to fulfill dominant ideals.

The relationship between motherhood and work in these discussions is also directly connected with debates around citizenship. The US welfare state is structured on a social insurance model rather than a universal entitlement model. Essentially it is based on the principle that individual citizens contribute to the state and that this entitles them to benefits, or what T.H. Marshall calls the 'social rights of citizens'. In practice, in the U.S., these contributions have always been expressed in the form of paid work and taxation. As a result, the social rights of citizenship have been 'tied to worklife participation'.¹⁰³ While 'worklife participation' appears superficially to be a race and gender neutral term, in reality the way in which work has been defined has masked the racialized and gendered hierarchy embedded in the labor market and the welfare state. Welfare state scholarship has long recognized that the two track welfare system treats raced and gendered bodies differently. The 1935 Social Security Act excluded particular types of work from the better funded and more reputable social insurance programs. This stratification was deliberate and, as Linda Gordon argues, primarily 'racially motivated' in so far as the types of work excluded, such as agricultural and domestic labor, were those areas which were dominated by African Americans.¹⁰⁴ Equally, while social security was quickly enlarged to include the widows of workers, most single mothers and most poor mothers of color remained excluded from these social insurance programs because motherhood was not considered sufficient in itself to constitute work and thus to entitle mothers to

¹⁰³ Quoted in C. Pateman, 'Equality, Difference, Subordination', *Beyond Equality*, p.22.

¹⁰⁴ L. Gordon, *Pitied but not Entitled*, p. 280.

benefits by right. These exclusions meant that women of color were forced to rely instead on the underfunded and stigmatized AFDC. Payments from these programs were not portrayed as earned benefits or automatic social rights but instead as entitlements from the state for which poor women of color had to prove their eligibility. In essence, this meant that individuals were positioned differently according to their race, class and gender with respect to their ability to make legitimate claims on the state as citizens.

While the following chapter will assess how welfare rights activists challenged the entanglement of work, citizenship and welfare, this chapter highlights how this discourse influenced legislative debates. The proponents of the Adequate Income Act were, like NWRO activists, attempting to break the link between citizenship and paid work and to create a universal welfare state that treated all citizens equally. At the heart of this effort was an attempt to radically redefine what it meant to be an American citizen and what obligations the state had to its citizens. As a result, the language its supporters used drew heavily on images and rhetoric around American constitutional history and the rights of its citizens. For example, Senator McCarthy charged that ‘the way in which the Constitution and the Bill of Rights... have been suspended or qualified in their application to the poor is one of the scandals of America – a scandal that should be ended’. He argued that the purpose of AIA was to do precisely this and to allow ‘every American’ the income to ‘freely express the fundamental rights and liberties expressed in the Constitution’.¹⁰⁵ In using this language and particularly in drawing connections between welfare, a guaranteed income and the Constitution, McCarthy and other supporters were looking to authenticate their claims and position AIA as the

¹⁰⁵ Senator Eugene McCarthy, Speech to Congress, *Congressional Record*, 2nd December 1970, Folder 16, Box 19, Wiley Papers.

legitimate inheritor of American values and traditions. In particular, they drew on the idea that America was failing to fulfill its own constitutional obligations. McCarthy argued that ‘among the expressed purposes of the Constitution is the desire to ensure the domestic tranquility and promote the general wellbeing’.¹⁰⁶ Nor was he the only one to employ this rationale. Senator Abraham A. Ribicoff, who attempted to create a compromise welfare bill that would unite the liberals and conservatives, argued that ‘The Declaration of Independence declared the “unalienable right of all men to ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”’.... Nearly 200 years have passed since the Declaration of Independence was signed. Two hundred years should be sufficient time to ensure these “unalienable rights”’.¹⁰⁷

While this counter discourse around welfare reform and a guaranteed adequate income appeared in Congress, most debate focused on FAP and drew more directly on hegemonic narratives around work and citizenship. Rather than attempting to redefine the relationship between the state and its citizens, FAP and its supporters sought to reinforce the idea that work is the necessary requirement that entitles citizens to benefits by including strenuous work requirements for fathers, and single mothers, and by extending benefits to the working poor. It was this extension of government support to the working poor that was at the heart of the Family Assistance Plan and was described by its supporters as its most radical provision. Essentially, these provisions would have tackled one inequity in the existing discourse on work and citizenship but not another. By including both the working poor and the non working poor in its remit, FAP would have expanded the definition of what counted as work to include the low paid, seasonal and often

¹⁰⁶ Senator Eugene McCarthy, Speech introducing the Adequate Income Bill, April 30 1970, Folder 4, Box 22, Wiley Papers.

¹⁰⁷ Senator Abraham Ribicoff, Press Release, April 20 1970, Folder 16, Box 20, Wiley Papers .

transitory jobs that dominated the southern economy and thus positioned fathers of all races as legitimate workers and citizens who had earned state support. This is not a small alteration, and as Jill Quadagno has rightly argued, FAP would have ‘raised the entire southern wage base and revolutionized its economy’.¹⁰⁸ Yet this assessment also reflects the discourse that FAP was drawing on, which viewed poverty as a result of family breakdown and therefore targeted its support at subsidizing male wages in order to rebuild the family wage.

However, in doing so, it failed to address the other paradox built into the traditional definition of work: motherhood. FAP in its initial form did not really concern itself with welfare mothers and included little in the way of work requirements or work incentives, even for single mothers. As such, it did not challenge the notion that women’s primary connection to the state should be as mothers rather than citizen workers. However, as the bill progressed, conservative politicians like Senator Russell Long, the chair of the Senate Committee on Finance, began to argue that by not explicitly tackling ‘illegitimacy and desertion’ and failing to include explicit work requirements for all welfare recipients, ‘the welfare provisions of HR 1 would not correct the glaring deficiencies of our present welfare system, but only make them several billion dollars more expensive’.¹⁰⁹ In the political climate of the early 1970s with a presidential election upcoming and the public increasingly hostile to welfare recipients, President Nixon could not afford to alienate conservatives in Congress. As a result, he accepted stricter work requirements and began to adopt a more explicitly confrontational rhetoric that tapped into the existing discourse that assumed that individuals were responsible for their own poverty. For example, he told a meeting of the Chamber

¹⁰⁸ J. Quadagno, “Race, Class and Gender”, *American Sociological Review*, p.23.

¹⁰⁹ Senator Russell Long, Opening Statement at Senate Finance Committee hearings on HR1, January 18 1972, Folder 16, Box 20, Wiley Papers.

of Commerce in April 1971 that ‘the able bodied people who think they can take a free ride are just going to have to get out and push with the rest of us’ and that ‘the most menial job I can think of is the one held by the able-bodied person who makes a career out of living off the hard earned dollars of his neighbor.’¹¹⁰ He reinforced the idea that good American citizens understand the dignity of labor and refused to challenge the racist and sexist economy that limited the opportunities open to welfare mothers instead arguing that ‘there was as much dignity’ in ‘scrubbing floors or emptying bedpans’ as ‘in any other work done in this country’.

In essence, Senator Long and his supporters wanted FAP to explicitly incorporate the definition of work that did not consider motherhood as a productive enterprise. Thus women who did not have a male provider who was indirectly earning their benefits would be required to undertake “productive labor” themselves. It is not simply that motherhood was only considered fitting work for certain types of women, although that discourse was also clearly present, but also that women were only seen as citizens in their own right when no male was present to act as a filter between them and the state. Single mothers then were considered citizens first, complete with the assumption that they must participate in the labor force in order to be entitled to state support, and mothers second, rather than mothers first and citizens only in so far as they are responsible for raising good citizens themselves. In discussions around FAP, Nixon rarely used the word mother when discussing work requirements and instead referred to ‘able bodied persons’ or, if addressing a particularly hostile audience, ‘free loaders’. For example, he argued that ‘no able bodied person will have a “free ride” in a nation that provides opportunities for training and work’. Thus he attempted to construct two distinct

¹¹⁰ President Nixon, Address at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, April 26 1971, Folder 12, Box 20, Wiley Papers.

images: one of the mother and one of the citizen and to mask that these two concepts coincided in the bodies of poor mothers, and particularly poor women of color. At its center this construction assumed, as its opponents recognized, that a 'segment of the population is poor because it chooses to be' and that it was the role of the welfare state to compel these individuals to be good mothers or to be good citizens by restricting their ability to make choices about their own lives.¹¹¹ Through this discourse, President Nixon could simultaneously claim to be supporting families and being tough on welfare cheats and avoid addressing the conflicting images of motherhood and citizenship and that these two positions created.

Ultimately, conservative discourse set welfare mothers and, single mothers in particular, up to fail and left them unable to successfully fulfill either their roles as mothers or as productive citizens. It denigrated their rights to make claims on the state and to define their own needs and instead positioned the state as the only legitimate authority on welfare reform. It was this toxic entanglement of motherhood, citizenship and productive work that welfare rights activists sought to challenge in their campaigns against the Family Assistance Plan. They sought to break the link between labor force participation and the social rights of citizens and establish a guaranteed adequate income as a fundamental inalienable right of American citizenship. As the next two chapters will demonstrate, in order to do this, welfare rights activists subverted the images of mothers and citizens embedded in the hegemonic discourse around welfare and instead constructed an alternative narrative that blended citizenship and motherhood and positioned welfare mothers as legitimate authorities on their own needs.

¹¹¹ Congressman Michael Harrington, 'Welfare Reform', *Congressional Record*, June 18 1971, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

'Mr Nixon is doing everything in his power to keep black and poor people down, hungry, starving and oppressed... it is impossible ... to live on that viscous, racist and fascist bill of \$1600 per year'

Mrs Etta Horn, Chairman of DC Citywide Welfare Rights Organization and Vice Chairman and founding member of the National Welfare Rights Organization¹¹²

III. Opposing the Family Assistance Plan: The National Welfare Rights Organization's Campaign to 'ZAP FAP'

While previous chapters focused on the legislative arena, the following two chapters will look at the welfare rights movement itself. The movement did, of course, respond to federal and state policies, but the focus here is less on the content of legislation than the character of activist protest. This chapter will examine the NWRO's use of discourses around motherhood and citizenship in its campaign against FAP and analyze how activists sought to counter the dominant discourses discussed in the previous chapters. As noted earlier, policy orientated scholarship has tended to minimize the role of welfare recipients who organized to demand recognition by the state. In doing so, policy studies provide only a partial perspective on the history of the welfare state. The following two chapters widen this perspective by examining the language that the NWRO and local WROs used in their campaigns. Putting *The Welfare Fighter*, NWRO publicity materials and interviews with NWRO activists in conversation with each other, this chapter analyzes the language that the NWRO used in its national campaigns and assesses the success of this strategy in such an unequally weighted discursive arena. The strategy itself was fundamentally shaped by welfare rights activists' intersectional identities and their personal experiences and understanding of welfare policies and the state. By wielding discourses about motherhood and citizenship NWRO activists sought to subvert the hegemonic narrative that dismissed poor people as

¹¹² Mrs Etta Horn, 'Report from Washington DC Rally at Lafayette Park', *Welfare Fighter*, April 1970.

responsible for their own poverty and, instead, to portray themselves as legitimate and authoritative participants in the national debate on welfare reform.

The National Welfare Rights Organization was formally established in 1966. Its founder, George Wiley, used the informal network that existed between local welfare rights organization and the Poverty/Rights Action Center in Washington, DC to arrange a nationwide day of protest on 30 June 1966 as a segue to setting up a formal national organization to represent welfare recipients. By 1971 the NWRO represented 540 separate local welfare rights organizations across the United States and, at its peak, had between 30,000 and 100,000 individual members.¹¹³ Its local affiliates organized hundreds of protest marches and sit-ins, and orchestrated successful state level campaigns for fair hearings and special grants. At the same time, at a national level, the NWRO lobbied the federal government to fundamentally reform the welfare system in order to achieve its key goals: an adequate income for recipients along with ‘justice, dignity and democracy’.¹¹⁴

The NWRO was open to all welfare recipients but its membership was primarily composed of African American mothers in receipt of AFDC. Premilla Nadasen estimates that in the mid-1960s the membership of the NWRO was 98 percent female, of which 85 percent was African American, 10 percent White and 5 percent Latina, plus a small group of Native American participants.¹¹⁵ States with affiliated groups were able to send delegates to the yearly meetings of the National Coordinating Committee at which NWRO policies were decided. This body was supplemented by an executive committee of nine elected welfare recipients, headed

¹¹³ F. Kornbluh, “The Goals of the National Welfare Rights Movement: Why We Need Them Thirty Years Later”, *Feminist Studies* 24, (Spring 1998), p.66; P. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, p.xiv.

¹¹⁴ Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*, p.67.

¹¹⁵ P. Nadasen, "Expanding the Boundaries," *Feminist Studies*, p.277.

by Johnnie Tillmon, which decided policy between NCC meetings. They also worked directly with the paid staff in the national office under the direction of George Wiley, the executive director until 1972, when he was replaced by Johnnie Tillmon.¹¹⁶

As the previous chapter notes, the battle over the Family Assistance Plan has often been marginalized in histories of the welfare state which generally focus on the early 1970s only as a precursor to the decline of the welfare rights movement as a whole. As a result, even many analyses of the NWRO have minimized its ZAP FAP campaign and concentrated either on the intra-organization tensions that emerged in the early 1970s or more vibrant local campaigns.¹¹⁷ Scholars thus tend to ignore the fact that the NWRO was still an important national political force in the late 1960s and 1970s and that its later disintegration was not inevitable to contemporaries. Indeed in the late 1960s, the NWRO was involved in a national campaign that had the potential to revolutionize welfare policy in the United States and fundamentally redefine the relationship between citizenship, motherhood and the state. The very fact that welfare rights advocates fought the introduction of the Family Assistance Plan so vehemently suggests that they believed this was a moment in which even more radical change could be introduced. Critics of the NWRO often treated welfare recipients as naïve or ill informed about the realities of politics and welfare reform. This is particularly clear in Daniel Moynihan's dismissal of NWRO activists as irrational 'welfare

¹¹⁶ While the elected recipients and state delegates were primarily poor African American single mothers, the paid staff members were mostly white middle class men. For a more detailed account of the impact that this divide had see Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, pp.125-156.

¹¹⁷ For an example of the former see P.Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*; for an example of the latter see A. Orleck *Storming Caesar's Palace*.

militants' and his praise of FAP as exceptional in its rationality.¹¹⁸ The language of rationality shrouds the classed, raced and gendered discourse at play by these critics who refuse to see AFDC recipients as legitimate sources of knowledge about welfare. NWRO activists, like numerous later feminist scholars, contested this perception and sought to position themselves as authorities on welfare whose experiential knowledge was not only valid but superior to politicians' limited understandings. As Johnnie Tillmon said in her March 1970 Message From the Chair, 'Organized clients know better than most people that all poor people are oppressed by the system'.¹¹⁹ Based on this logic, activists demanded that the state recognize their right to define their own needs rather than having these needs dictated to them by legislators.

As Nancy Fraser has argued, 'who gets to establish authoritative...definitions of people's needs is itself a political stake'.¹²⁰ As the previous two chapters demonstrate, language around motherhood and citizenship offered particularly powerful narrative framings to draw on in order to establish legitimacy. It is therefore unsurprising that the NWRO chose to rely heavily on maternalist language in its campaign against the FAP and in support of the AIA. Not only were the majority of NWRO members mothers but there was also already a long history of women legitimating their participation in the public sphere on the basis of their status as mothers. Maternalism originally emerged as an ideology in the early twentieth century and drew heavily on traditional, primarily white middle class, ideas about the virtues of domesticity, women's moral vision, and the compassion and

¹¹⁸ D. Moynihan, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income: The Nixon Administration and the Family Assistance Plan*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p.9.

¹¹⁹ J. Tillmon, 'Message From the Chair', *Welfare Fighter*, March 1970.

¹²⁰ N. Fraser, 'Struggle Over Needs', in *Women, the State and Welfare*, p.202.

nurturance provided by mothers.¹²¹ While the Mother Power advocated by the NWRO was decidedly different from the maternalist rhetoric of earlier twentieth century social reformers, there were certain similarities in the ways in which both used images of motherhood. In particular, both groups highlighted ideas about children's rights and claimed that mothers, and women more widely, had some innate quality or essence that ensured that they knew what was best for children. Thus just as maternalists in the early twentieth century entered the political sphere to campaign for federal laws protecting children, welfare recipients justified their political actions on the grounds that they were mothers acting to protect and provide for their children.

In their testimony against the FAP in November 1970, NWRO activists used motherhood repeatedly to frame their testimony and to explain their participation in welfare rights. Thus Mrs Joyce Eliot, a welfare mother from Minnesota, began, 'I am a mother of two children that I love dearly and this is my first concern'. And Mrs Shirley Rivers, another NWRO representative, claimed, 'I had a lot to say about a whole lot of issues. But I think I am just going to stick to the part of being a mother. You see I have a two year old son', while Mrs Marianne Lewis from Louisiana explained, 'I am a mother of seven children...and I am sure as a representative I am speaking for all the mothers of Louisiana'.¹²² The NWRO also regularly emphasized the importance of children in their campaigns and the role that mothers played in providing for their needs. For example, the October 1970 headline in the *Welfare Fighter* reads, 'HEW bows to Mother Power', and the article refers to the NWRO's success in getting the US Department of Health,

¹²¹ For a more detailed accounts of maternalist policies in the early twentieth century see Sonya Michel and Seth Koven, *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹²² NWRO testimony against FAP at Senator McCarthy's 'Special Hearings on HR16311', November 18 1970, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

Education and Welfare to provide recipients with special grants in order to buy school clothes for their children.¹²³ Similarly, in the NWRO's public statement against FAP the organization argued against compulsory work requirements on the grounds that 'the mother is in the best position to know what effect not taking a particular job would have on her young school child'.¹²⁴ By explaining their activism in terms of mothers acting on behalf of their children, welfare mothers could contest the idea that they were bad parents and, in doing so, establish their authority as experts on welfare.

Both welfare recipients and earlier maternalists deployed a construction of motherhood that positioned women as responsible for all children in society not simply their own children. Drawing on the same discourse that allowed conservative Senators to oppose the CCD, on the grounds that it would threaten the sacred mother-child bond and institutionalize families, the NWRO argued that the FAP carried a similar threat to the maternal bond and that the NWRO was in fact protecting all American families against state intrusion. FAP, they claimed, would 'force [mothers], literally at the pain of starvation, to leave their homes, and commit their children to government run centers'.¹²⁵ The same theme runs through several of the anti-FAP posters. For example, a 1972 poster reads "50,000 SAY NO TO FAP. YES TO CHILDREN"; and another, advertising hearings on HR1, shows a picture of Congressman Wilbur Mills, Chair of the House Committee on Appropriations, with the words "WANTED – FOR CONSPIRACY TO STARVE CHILDREN, DESTROY FAMILIES, FORCE WOMEN INTO SLAVERY AND

¹²³ "HEW Bows to Mother Power", *Welfare Fighter*, October 1970.

¹²⁴ NWRO statement to House Ways and Means Committee, October 27 1969, Folder 3, Box 17, Wiley Papers.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

EXPLOIT POOR PEOPLE”.¹²⁶ In these ways, the NWRO subverted the hegemonic image of the good mother that excluded welfare recipients and instead positioned welfare mothers as the true protectors of the American family and American children. Consider the wording of the following statement by a welfare recipient quoted in the *Welfare Fighter* in January 1970: ‘If it takes a gun put to someone’s head to feed a child, we’ll take a gun’.¹²⁷ Not only does she use the collective we, but she also refers to an abstract child rather than directly to her own children.

In a similar vein, NWRO activists used language around motherhood as part of a strategy to overcome the state’s deliberate misrecognition of their identities and to counter the public persona of welfare mothers as lazy and irresponsible. The organization sought instead to establish alliances with other women across class and race lines on the basis of their shared identity as mothers. Activists like Mrs Gladys Harris emphasized the commonalities of motherhood in their testimony against the FAP. She argued that “my children are just like yours. They get sick, and they have problems, school problems. And I worry just like you do,” and thereby sought to force middle class and upper class women to identify with the struggles of poor single mothers.¹²⁸ She thus wielded maternal discourse to bring a universal identity into being. In a similar way, the Vice Chair of the Rhode Island Welfare organization wrote a plea at holiday time, lamenting that her children ‘want toys the same as anybody else’ and that it was heartbreaking telling them they could not have Christmas presents.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ NWRO Convention Program, Miami 1972, Folder 9, Box 7, Wiley Papers; “Wanted”, *Welfare Fighter*, February 1971.

¹²⁷ “Kansas County Heads Welfare Demands”, *Welfare Fighter*, January 1970.

¹²⁸ NWRO testimony against FAP, November 18 1970, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

¹²⁹ Beverly Galmore, *Rhode Island Fair Welfare*, [nd], Box 15, Kotz Papers.

The NWRO enlisted middle class women to make the same point about the universality of motherhood. In particular, through their ‘Live on a Welfare Budget campaign’, they targeted the wives of sympathetic congressmen who could be persuaded to speak out against the misrepresentations of welfare mothers and their demonization in the public sphere. For example, Mrs Philip Hart, who had taken part in the NWRO’s campaign, spoke to the Women’s National Democratic Club in October 1969 where she appealed to the audience on the grounds of their shared experiences and fears as mothers, particularly working mothers. She argued that “middle class working mothers would be very uncomfortable about leaving their children at home for two or three hours in an inner city neighborhood. It may surprise you to know that ghetto mothers feel the same way’. This use of universalizing language might appear to reify traditional female identities and to simply mirror earlier maternalist paeans to collective and social motherhood. However, for welfare recipients, who had been positioned as passive recipients rather than active participants by earlier maternalists and by many contemporary feminists, it represented a radical attempt to redefine motherhood as a political identity on their terms and to marshal mothers across the country to act with them and not for them.

As the above analysis suggests, there were fundamental philosophical and linguistic differences between the NWRO’s deployment of ‘Mother Power’ and earlier maternalist discourses. Earlier reformers, including both white and black middle class women, sought to use motherhood to create a political voice that, in many ways, subverted social expectations of mothers. However, the discursive and performative manifestations of this voice were far less oppositional than that of NWRO activists, reflecting middle-class reformers’ distance from the subjects of

their activism and their relative class privilege. Welfare recipients' activism was much more intimately connected with their own intersectional positions as poor single mothers of color for whom survival was in itself a form of resistance. Thus, Mother Power, as the name suggests, was drew its strength as much from radical ideas about direct action, protest and civil disobedience connected with Black Power movements as it did from middle-class maternalism. There are numerous examples of other NWRO activists expressing their anger at the state's continual misrecognition of their claims and their willingness to break the law in order to protect their children. Their own words are particularly powerful: welfare recipients are "ready to go to jail rather than allow their children to attend school dressed in rags"; "If I don't get any food for my kids, I'm going to walk into a grocery store and fill my basket and walk out"; "If they send me to jail... I'll write a book. They will not stop my work. I have no fear of them, only disgust".¹³⁰ Similarly, in her testimony against FAP Alma Perry, a representative from Newark, New Jersey asserted, 'before I see my children live under this... I will march up to the White House or wherever he is, withstand all the bullets and everything else coming down, you understand, because I will be better off dead'.¹³¹

The importance of social location in shaping how women deployed language around motherhood also comes through clearly in the few extant personal exchanges between the NWRO and contemporary women's political organizations. As chapter two and three suggest, the relationship between welfare rights and the emerging women's movement was fractious: both white and black middle class feminists, including Frances Beale, dismissed motherhood as a source of

¹³⁰ Mrs Nettie McQueen, quoted in NWRO Fall-Winter Campaign Leaflet, Box 22, Folder 5, Wiley Papers. Kansas County Heads Welfare Demands", *Welfare Fighter*, January 1970; "Welfare Leader Arrested, *The Virginia Weekly*, July-August 1971, Wisconsin Historical Society, reel 76.

¹³¹ NWRO testimony against FAP, November 18 1970, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

empowerment and many, like Congresswoman Griffiths, were unable to see welfare mothers as political actors.¹³² As a result, the NWRO felt that women's organizations often ignored or minimized poor women's concerns and did not seem to understand that welfare reform was a life or death issue for them. In an undated handwritten letter to Lucy Benson, the President of the League of Women Voters, Johnnie Tillmon expresses the NWRO's concern about the League's decision to support the Ribicoff Amendments to HR1 in 1971. She writes we are 'very concerned about your apparent desertion of welfare mothers in our fight to defeat HR1... We urgently request immediate meeting with league leadership and NWRO on these life and death matters to millions of poor women and children'.¹³³ In a similar letter, Beulah Sanders criticizes the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) for their support of Martha Griffiths, the Congresswoman discussed above, who was a nominee to the Supreme Court. Countering the NWPC's narrative that argued that Griffiths had been strong on women's issues, Sanders argued that Griffiths had been 'terrible on welfare issues' and that the NWPC's support of her is a clear 'indication of the middle class attitudes of some of the leadership of the Caucus'.¹³⁴

As this suggests, in order to assess the destabilizing potential of the NWRO's discourse around motherhood, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of welfare recipients' intersectional identities. The way in which activists deployed language around motherhood was fundamentally shaped by their own lived experiences and their desire to challenge the hegemonic discourse that portrayed family breakdown and bad mothers as the primary cause of poverty. A

¹³² Frances Beale, the black feminist and SNCC activist, dismissed full time motherhood as a 'sterile existence' quoted in P. Nadasen, 'Expanding the Boundaries', p.278.

¹³³ J. Tillmon to L. Benson, [subject dates it to late 1971], Folder 15, Box 19, Wiley Papers.

¹³⁴ B. Sanders to National Women's Political Caucus, 1972, Folder 9, Box 36, Wiley Papers.

race first or gender first perspective only allows for a partial analysis of the way in which welfare activists used motherhood to contest the Family Assistance Plan. Instead it is necessary to look at the NWRO's language through an intersectional perspective that gives analytical weight to intra-racial differences, particularly related to class, as well as interracial differences. In actively claiming the right to be full time mothers, welfare recipients contested the classed, gendered and raced discourse that praised white middle class full time mothers as fulfilling the feminine ideal while demonizing poor welfare mothers who wanted the right to stay at home and raise their children. Lillian Baines, Vice Chairman of Wyandotte Co. WRO made a similar point in her article in the *Welfare Fighter*, 'Why Not a Subsidy for Mothers?', in which she argued that 'the average mother... would rather stay home and raise her children, but society labels her a leech, less than a woman, if she does exist, I must stress exist, on welfare'.¹³⁵ NWRO activists like Baines subverted existing assumptions about what it meant to be a poor mother and challenged classed, raced and gendered depictions of motherhood that Nixon's Family Assistance Plan perpetuated.

While this discourse does, to an extent, reify traditional gender roles and support a conservative discourse that devalues working mothers, for welfare mothers it was a radical choice to claim the right to be full time mothers. As many feminist scholars have argued, motherhood is not a universal experience for women but instead a socially constructed relationship or institution that is historically specific and whose meaning and implications are distinctly raced and classed.¹³⁶ Black feminist scholars in particular, including Bonnie Thornton Dill and Patricia

¹³⁵ L. Baines, 'Why Not a Subsidy for Mothers', *Welfare Fighter*, May 1970.

¹³⁶ For an insightful discussion on motherhood see *Mothering Ideology, Experience & Agency*, eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey, (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Hill Collins, have compellingly argued that African American women have a very different history and relationship with motherhood than white women.¹³⁷ While white feminists in the 1960s and later have often portrayed the family and motherhood as the key source of women's oppression, black feminists have exposed the raced silences in such universalizing discourses and shown how the family has also been an important site of support, community and resistance for African American women. Thornton Dill, in particular, argues that the systematic denial of African American family units in American history made such families a 'potential source of political action, cultural resistance, community organization and individual mobility'.¹³⁸ Hill Collins also connects black women's political organizing to African traditions of motherwork as well as to the African American history of slavery. She argues that black women see their own survival as intimately connected with the survival of their communities and that this shapes the way they conceptualize motherhood.¹³⁹

The NWRO's discourse around Mother Power clearly reflected this specific history of motherhood as well as recipients lived experiences of the raced and gendered division of labor. Drawing explicitly on African American women's distinct relationship with productive and reproductive labor, the NWRO criticized the assumption built into FAP that paid work is always liberating. Instead, arguing that FAP did not create real jobs for single mothers, they likened forced work requirements to pushing mothers into 'slave-wage work'. At the same time, the lack of concrete daycare provisions reduced poor mothers of color to 'institutionalized, partially self-employed mummies'. These veiled and direct

¹³⁷ B. Thornton Dill, "Our Mothers' Grief: Racial Ethnic Women and the Maintenance of Families", *Journal of Family History*, October 1988, pp.415-431; P. Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood", *Mothering: Ideology, Experience*, pp.45-66.

¹³⁸ B. Thornton Dill, "Our Mothers' Grief", *Journal of Family History*, p.5.

¹³⁹ P. Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center", *Mothering: Ideology, Experience*, p.50.

allusions to slavery run throughout the NWRO's campaign against FAP, from early critiques that claim the policy would reintroduce the 'badge of servitude' to more explicit condemnations like that of NWRO committee member, Mrs Mildred Prem, who argued that 'slavery is slavery no matter what word you give it or how you phrase it. And that is where we are at'.¹⁴⁰

These criticisms of FAP were built on the idea that economic assistance from the state could be potentially liberating for poor women of color but not if policies were built on the concept of the family wage system, which was not designed to support female headed families and did not target work training programs to their specific needs. While many welfare recipients did express a desire to work if appropriate training programs and stable jobs were provided, the NWRO argued that welfare mothers should have the right not to work and to raise their children if they chose. As one of the NWRO's pamphlets asked, 'Should a Mother Work for \$1.20 an hour?' It then argued that under a real work incentive, 'the mother has the choice of whether she wants the additional money or the additional time with her children'.¹⁴¹ Or as Audrey Williams, the NWRO representative for Pennsylvania, declared in her testimony against FAP, 'No mother should be forced out of her household to take care of somebody else's children if she can take care of her own, and if you are going to pay someone to take care of someone else's child, pay her to take care of her own'.¹⁴² For African American women and women of color more generally, who had traditionally been excluded from ideals of motherhood and domesticity, a maternalist discourse that

¹⁴⁰ NWRO statement, October 27 1969, Folder 3, Box 17, Wiley Papers; NWRO testimony against FAP, November 18 1970, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

¹⁴¹ 'Should a Mother Work for \$1.20 an hour?', 1970, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

¹⁴² NWRO testimony against FAP, November 18 1970, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

asserted the right of poor African American women to be mothers had radical destabilizing potential.

This is particularly true of the way in which activists connected maternalist ideals with language around citizenship. The NWRO challenged the state to fundamentally rethink its treatment of single mothers and asserted that all welfare recipients were citizens who had the same right to make claims on the state as any other American. The hegemonic discourse around FAP and welfare more widely created two distinct images of motherhood and citizenship and ignored the ways they collided in the bodies of poor single mothers of color. As such, policymakers avoided dealing with the question of what counted as productive work and whether the state viewed women primarily as mothers or workers. In contrast, the NWRO explicitly tackled this question. As the organization stated in its official testimony before the US Senate Finance Committee in February 1972 ‘the question becomes what is useful work? Is the work of a mother raising her children just as important as the work she might do in an office, as a waitress, on an assembly line, or as a domestic? We believe it is.’¹⁴³ They argued that the philosophy underpinning FAP was similar to that underlying AFDC, and earlier welfare reform bills, in that it assumed that welfare recipients did not contribute to the state and therefore did not earn the social rights of citizenship. As a result, recipients had to ‘give up their rights as citizens because they are accepting “public charity”’.¹⁴⁴ In essence, they sought to redefine productive work to include motherhood in order to challenge the idea that it was only through paid work outside the home that individuals legitimately earned benefits from the state.

¹⁴³ NWRO Testimony before the US Senate Finance Committee, February 2 1972, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

In many ways this toxic entanglement between welfare mothers and citizenship was at the heart of the NWRO's opposition to FAP. Despite its inclusion of the working poor and male headed families with female headed families, the Family Assistance Plan would have perpetuated the separation of assistance to poor women and families from the provision of assistance to more 'worthy' welfare programs like Aid to the Blind or Social Security. It therefore would have reinforced ideas about individual culpability for poverty. Looking at FAP through this lens helps explain why NWRO activists opposed FAP so vehemently. The major difference between FAP and AIA was that the latter, based on the NWRO's own Guaranteed Annual Income Bill, applied to all citizens and not just to families. As the NWRO said when launching its campaign: the 'NWRO is launching a nationwide campaign for a GUARANTEED ADEQUATE INCOME for every American citizen' because 'we believe that every man, woman and child has a right to live.'¹⁴⁵ This idea was at the center of the NWRO's mission to achieve not just an adequate income for welfare recipients but also justice, dignity and democracy for all Americans. Johnnie Tillmon expressed this goal in her March 1970 'Message from the Chair' when she said that is what the 'NWRO is all about, an organization of poor people trying to obtain their legal and human rights in a country that seems intent on denying the rights of certain classes of people.'¹⁴⁶

NWRO activists therefore also sought to challenge directly the paradigm of black cultural pathology by redefining welfare as a right and not an entitlement. In order to do so, the NWRO's campaign against FAP relied heavily on language around citizenship and rights, both in conjunction with and separate from

¹⁴⁵ "Welfare Rights Activists Propose a Guaranteed Annual Income", reprinted in *Welfare in the United States*, p.158.

¹⁴⁶ Johnnie Tillmon, "Message From Chair", *Welfare Fighter*, March 1970.

discourses around motherhood. One way in which they challenged the dominant narrative was to draw on the mother blaming discourses discussed in chapter two. They subverted the psychosomatic definition of citizenship underpinning this discourse in order to cut the link between bad mothering and specific raced and classed identities. Rather than accepting welfare mothers as a symptom or cause of pathology within the state, they argued that if bad mothers were responsible for raising bad citizens who caused social problems, the state should reward good mothers who were raising children who would contribute to society. In her testimony against FAP in 1970, Wisconsin NWRO representative Cassie Downier argued that ‘when the mothers are staying home and taking care of their children. I feel that they are working/ and I feel that this is one of the greatest jobs a mother can do for her children and also for her country’.¹⁴⁷ As Johnnie Tillmon said more directly, ‘I am gainfully employed. I raised two nice big healthy sons who will one day be quite capable of making their contribution to society’.¹⁴⁸ These activists went even further and argued that it was more important to support poor mothers in raising good citizens because the capitalist state relied on the children of low income communities to take fill certain jobs. In his recollections of the NWRO’s testimony against FAP, Senator McCarthy recalls an NWRO activist making precisely this point: ‘we’re not supposed to be at home in the morning to see your future soldiers and policeman and fireman off to school... But these women who are producing your future insurance salesmen... they’re supposed to be there’.¹⁴⁹

At the same time they also attempted to redefine what it meant to be an American citizen and what rights citizenship should automatically endow They

¹⁴⁷ NWRO testimony against FAP, November 18 1970, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

¹⁴⁸Quoted in ‘Income Rights, Mothers’ Rights, or Workers’ Rights? Collective Action Frames, Organizational Ideologies, and the American Welfare Rights Movement’, E, Reese, G. Newcombe, *Social Problems*, May 2003, p. 302.

¹⁴⁹ Senator Eugene McCarthy, interview with Nick Kotz, [nd], Box 25, Kotz Papers.

argued that ‘human rights are God-given. Simply because one exists in the image of God, he is entitled to certain basic human rights, to the realization of his potential’.¹⁵⁰ More than this, though, they argued that welfare was a necessary right in order for individuals to be able to realize their potential and to exercise the rights that the Constitution guaranteed to all American citizens. As the NWRO said in its initial testimony against the FAP on October 27, 1969, ‘the idea of welfare as a right rather than a privilege is vital in a democracy. A right to life is necessary for the exercise of all other rights under the Constitution’.¹⁵¹ In doing so they attempted to detach citizenship rights from paid work and to remove the necessity for welfare mothers to be divided into mothers or citizens, depending on whether their primary relationship was with another man or with the state. Tapping into civil rights discourses, welfare mothers drew attention to the historical failings of the United States to extend citizenship rights to certain groups of people and demanded that the nation reassess how it positioned poor women of color. For example, Beulah Sanders warned, ‘When you set up the damn constitution, it meant that people had to go to a poll and pull a lever to put you in office... we vote now, baby’.¹⁵² They emphasized that welfare recipients, like all Americans, were citizens under the protection of the Constitution and entitled to certain rights.

By arguing that America was failing to live up to its obligations in the Constitution and its own rhetoric and promises, NWRO activists could undermine the narrative that portrayed welfare recipients as ‘free loaders’ and instead portray themselves as the inheritors of a long tradition of American citizens fighting for their constitutional rights. The NWRO presented the Guaranteed Annual Income Act and their wider demands for dignity, justice and democracy as calling for the

¹⁵⁰ NWRO Testimony, February 2 1972, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

¹⁵¹ NWRO statement, October 27 1969, Folder 3, Box 17, Wiley Papers.

¹⁵² NWRO testimony against FAP, November 18 1970, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

US to live up to its own ideals and extend to all citizens the rights guaranteed in the Constitution. In October 1970 the *Welfare Fighter* printed a Welfare Bill of Rights modeled on the US Bill of Rights. This new Bill of Rights began by stating ‘like all rights, welfare rights are meaningless unless welfare recipients know their rights, demand their rights, use their rights, and protect their rights’. Welfare recipients’ activism, such articles suggested, was part and parcel of American democracy and participatory citizenship. Other recipients also drew on familiar images and ideas from American history and connected them with their own lives as citizens and mothers. For example, J Ramon Trujillo, the Colorado WRO leader, wrote a letter entitled ‘Mommy’ in December 1969 which recounted the story a welfare mother’s struggle to provide for her children and ended with a call to arms to other recipients to ensure ‘that public welfare will go down in history like the Boston Tea Party’. In this image welfare mothers are explicitly repositioned as American revolutionaries fighting for freedom and democracy.¹⁵³ When tied together in this manner, motherhood and citizenship were powerful framings for welfare rights activists to adopt because they provided dual legitimation for their activism. The NWRO’s actions were both those of mothers protecting their children and of American citizens defending their constitutional rights.

Blending motherhood and citizenship together in this way embodies the connections that the NWRO drew between motherhood, citizenship and poverty in their campaign against the Family Assistance Plan. For welfare recipients seeking to establish their right to define their own needs, using language around motherhood and citizenship allowed them to challenge the dominant image of immoral welfare mothers as responsible for poverty and to legitimate their claims

¹⁵³ “Bill of Welfare Rights”, *Welfare Fighter*, October 1970; J. Ramon Trujillo, “Mommy”, *Welfare Fighter*, December 1969.

on the state. Welfare mothers wanted to be able to choose how they lived and decide for themselves whether or not to be full time mothers, and they argued that as American citizens the state had a duty to support them whichever decision they made. Moreover, as mothers, the state had an interest in supporting them to raise good productive citizens. However, the NWRO's campaign against FAP did not simply reify traditional discourses around motherhood and citizenship. Instead, it is crucial to recognize that the discourse around motherhood and citizenship that the NWRO constructed was fundamentally shaped by the intersectional identities of its members.

Positioned on the margins of American society and historically excluded from ideals of both motherhood and citizenship, NWRO mothers subverted the hegemonic discourse that blamed poverty on the immorality of poor communities and on individual failings and challenged the state to recognize welfare recipients as both legitimate citizens and mothers. In a political culture that demonized welfare mothers this was a radical decision that did allow, at least for a time, NWRO activists to demand a stake in defining the direction of welfare policy. However, even though the NWRO's campaign to ZAP FAP succeeded, the organization's effort to introduce more comprehensive welfare reform policies failed. As a result, as with the War on Poverty, a top down perspective on the welfare rights movement can risk emphasizing its failures and miss the fact that the movement had substantial local successes and a significant impact on the lived experiences of those involved. As the introduction suggests language and discourse provides a common thread that can be traced through the national political arena, the NWRO and into various localities. As a result, the next chapter will examine how ideas around motherhood and citizenship manifested themselves in local

welfare rights organizations and emphasize the radical potential that they offered to those who had been historically disenfranchised by state and federal governments.

“They said well I haven’t done anything. I said, oh yeah, you did it, you know you did it. Our children are hungry, barefoot, raggedy, you’re the one, the reason why. Well that’s all I could see. They were the reason why those children are hungry. They were the reason why our children was barefoot...It was then I realized my problem was the same problem that the rest of those poor people were having. It was our problem.”

Ruby Duncan, President of Clark County Welfare Rights Organization, Nevada, recalling her reaction to state senators at her first picket at the Nevada Capitol in the early 1970s.¹⁵⁴

IV. Empowering Mothers and Creating Citizens: Welfare Rights at a Grassroots Level

The previous chapter focused on the National Welfare Rights Organization. This chapter will move on to look specifically at the local welfare rights organizations (WROs) that came into being across the US in the 1960s and 1970s. It will analyze how ideas around motherhood and citizenship were deployed in campaigns by WROs at a grassroots level. Reading this discourse in conversation with the national discourse discussed earlier, I will argue that constructions of motherhood and citizenship were central to the way in which recipients contested the hegemonic discourse on welfare at both a grassroots and a national level. However, at the grassroots level, language did not just serve as a site of political contestation but also as a crucial site of identity construction. Both the NWRO and local WROs attempted to wield concepts of motherhood and citizenship in order to transform the public identity of welfare recipients. At the same time, local WROs also drew on these narrative frames in order to transform the individual identities of welfare recipients and to empower welfare mothers to take an active part in the movement. It was at a local level that debates about what it meant to be a good mother or a productive citizen collided with the lived experience of recipients and where activists had to discursively and performatively contest their positioning by the state. In this local setting, reclaiming motherhood and citizenship could be successful in countering state misrecognition and, more fundamentally, in

¹⁵⁴ Ruby Duncan, interview with Mary Lynn Kotz, November 14 1974, Box 24, Kotz Papers.

transforming welfare mothers from passive recipients to active participants in the welfare state.

Before analyzing the language used by local welfare rights organizations, it is useful to map the geographic terrain of the movement in the early 1970s. The welfare rights movement was not a singular public that spoke with one united voice. This chapter will therefore examine a sample of welfare rights groups and put them in conversation with each other in order to highlight certain recurring images and themes. However, it is important to note that the sample used here is not necessarily representative of the whole spectrum of welfare rights groups. Instead, it is biased towards those groups whose activities are recorded in the archives, primarily those who had significant contact with George Wiley and the NWRO. As a result, it focuses on larger and more active groups like the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization (PWRO), the Brooklyn Welfare Action Council (BWAC) and the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO).¹⁵⁵ The MWRO, as Lawrence Bailis demonstrates in his contemporaneous study, were particularly closely linked to the NWRO, and this is clear in the level of support they demonstrated for the national campaign against the FAP.¹⁵⁶ However, not all of the WROs discussed here supported the NWRO unconditionally. Indeed Roxanne Jones is explicit in her recollections that the Philadelphia WRO was not always supportive and did not join the NWRO until January 1969 because of this skepticism, and Rhoda Linton recalls BWAC's frustration with the NWRO's priorities at times.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ The Wiley papers do have files on welfare rights organisations in all states but the amount of material in each varies hugely. Other smaller groups will also be discussed where appropriate.

¹⁵⁶ L. Bailis, *Bread or Justice: Grassroots Organizing in the Welfare Rights Movement*, (Lexington, MA; Lexington Books 1974).

¹⁵⁷ Roxanne Jones, interview with Mary Lynn Kotz and Nick Kotz, November 7 1974; Andrea Kidd, interview with Mary Lynn Kotz and Nick Kotz, November 5 1974, Box 25, Kotz Papers.

The NWRO itself was essentially ‘more a federation of local groups than a direct membership organization.’¹⁵⁸ In 1971 it represented 540 separate local organizations each of which had its own organizational structure, its own constituency, and its own way of organizing recipients.¹⁵⁹ It is clearly not possible to consider each WRO individually. However, it is possible to draw some general observations about these groups as a whole and their relationship with the NWRO. There were three main models affiliated with the national organization: those, like the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization, which evolved separately and only affiliated with it at a later date; those, like the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization, which were directly established by paid NWRO organizers; and those, like the Brooklyn Welfare Action Council, which were partly organized by the NWRO and partly organic.¹⁶⁰ These groups also had different organizing styles. For example, Johnnie Tillmon recalls that the ANC Mothers Anonymous, the Los Angeles welfare rights organization in which she was involved, ‘didn’t have no radical confrontation kind of stuff’ in the way that the New York groups did because the welfare department in California was more cooperative than its New York City counterpart.¹⁶¹ Each local group had to respond to its own individual political circumstances and these circumstances both shaped the way in which organizations operated and the campaigns that they focused on as well as their relationship with the NWRO.

In general, the relationship between grassroots welfare rights organizations and the NWRO was fairly symbiotic. National and local groups had to be in conversation with each other as the debate on welfare reform was taking place at

¹⁵⁸ P. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, p.42

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.xiv

¹⁶⁰ Johnnie Tillmon, interview with Nick Kotz and Mary Lynn Kotz, November 26 1974, Box 26, Kotz Papers.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*.

both federal and state levels. While the NWRO was fighting the FAP nationally, numerous states, including New York and Massachusetts, were trying to introduce similar legislation that would preempt its introduction nationally.¹⁶² Local affiliates were clearly influenced by the NWRO's priorities and campaigns, including the campaign to 'ZAP FAP'. For example, the MWRO printed its own version of the NWRO's Anti FAP leaflet; the Maryland Welfare Rights Organization held its own People's Hearings on FAP; and the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization made a guaranteed adequate income its number one demand in its proposals to the State of Michigan in 1969.¹⁶³ At the same time, the NWRO regularly copied successful campaign ideas from local organizations. In particular, Roxanne Jones recalls that it was the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization that first organized a credit campaign, a very successful tactic that the NWRO then encouraged other local WROs to copy.¹⁶⁴

Ultimately, the welfare rights movement collectively was attempting to challenge the dominant discourse on welfare discussed in chapter two and three and to create political space to become active participants in the debate on welfare reform. As a result, there are clear similarities in the way in which local and national organizations used language around motherhood and maternalism. As has been suggested, there was already a pre-existing history of using motherhood as a justification for female political participation. It is clear that local welfare rights organizations, similarly to the NWRO, drew on this history, and on motherhood and traditional female identities more generally, as explanatory frameworks for

¹⁶² For details of the MWRO and New York campaigns see F. Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights* and L. Bailis, *Bread and Justice*.

¹⁶³ 'MWRO wants to Zap Fap', Folder 3; "People's Hearing on HR1", March 9 1971, Folder 2; "Proposals to the State of Michigan for Minimum Needs of Welfare Recipients, June 1969, Folder 5, Box 25, Wiley Papers.

¹⁶⁴ Roxanne Jones interview, November 7 1974, Box 25, Kotz Papers.

their actions. This rhetoric shaped both their discursive and performative actions and was clearly consciously adopted. An article from *The Virginia Weekly* reports that on December 6, 1970 forty welfare mothers took over Macy's in Virginia and stole children's clothes. The article states that when police officers arrested them and tried to take the clothes from them, 'the women did not allow them to. They knew the school clothes were important. If they didn't have the clothes the police would charge them with stealing all sorts of things – which would lessen the political implication of their act'.¹⁶⁵ It is clear from this report and the fact that a judge threw out the more serious charges against the women that some officials accepted that the act was 'political' in nature, that motherhood could be an effective justification for welfare rights activists. There are other similar examples of local WROs cloaking their activism in maternalist language in order to legitimize it and to increase the likelihood it would attract wider support. For example, welfare rights organizations in Wisconsin chose Mothers Day 1968 to launch their basic needs campaign by holding a joint demonstration of welfare mothers and children outside the Capitol building in Madison.¹⁶⁶ This was clearly a symbolic choice designed to focus media attention on the fact that welfare recipients were primarily mothers and children. Furthermore, picking up on the NWRO's Children's March for Survival, Wisconsin WROs also held their own Children's Survival Campaign to reinforce the notion that welfare mothers were only taking political action because it was their duty to provide for their children.¹⁶⁷

Local welfare rights groups also tapped into the belief that mothers innately know what is best for their children and are the moral guardians of the nation. As

¹⁶⁵ "We Took What we Needed", *The Virginia Weekly*, December 7 1970.

¹⁶⁶ "Support the Mothers March on Madison", *Worker Student Caucus SDS*, September 1971, Folder 3, Box 27, Wiley Papers.

¹⁶⁷ "Children's March for Survival", March 1972, Folder 3, Box 27, Wiley Papers.

such they claimed to speak with the collective moral authority of mothers. For example, in the MWRO newsletter, *Adequate Income Times*, Claradine James, the group's delegate to the NWRO National Coordinating Committee, published a poem called "Sorry, it's none of our business." The poem ended with the lines, 'As mothers, we say to people everywhere / This war on poverty is your moral and human obligation / VERY MUCH YOUR BUSINESS'. Activists also drew on traditional female identities more widely. In her work on earlier maternalism, Molly Ladd Taylor highlights how many of the earlier progressive maternalists, like Jane Addams and Julia Lathrop, were pacifists who drew on images of motherhood in order to argue for the 'allocation of society's resources away from war and toward children and families'.¹⁶⁸ Welfare mothers used similar rhetoric in order to oppose the Vietnam War and to argue for a reallocation of resources towards the poor. This rhetoric was very much shaped by the intersectional identities of welfare recipients who were very aware that their sons were more likely to be drafted into the army than middle class white children. The Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization protested outside an army base in Boston in October 1969 using the slogan 'Stop the War and Feed the Poor' and argued that America needed to reconsider its priorities and put mothers and children first. They also challenged the government explicitly about the inequities in the draft and questioned the state's commitment to its soldiers. As Etta Horn said, 'If you can clothe our children to put them on a battlefield, then you can clothe them for education'.¹⁶⁹

However, as with the NWRO, there was clearly a difference between the way in which earlier maternalists used language around motherhood and the way in

¹⁶⁸ M. Ladd Taylor, *Mother-Work*, p.203.

¹⁶⁹ Etta Horn, Testimony to the President's Commission on Income Maintenance Programs, September 13 1968, Box 17, Kotz Papers.

which local WROs did. Early twentieth century maternalists drew on motherhood because, as middle class white women, they could legitimately position themselves as good mothers, regardless of their actual familial situation, and could claim to speak with the moral authority of motherhood. While Eileen Boris has correctly pointed out that black club woman used maternalist discourses in the early twentieth century to contest images of motherhood that excluded African Americans, it is not clear that black middle class clubwomen ever intended to include poor mothers or single mothers in their own definition of domestic womanhood.¹⁷⁰ Most welfare recipients, therefore, had never been included in societal definitions of good motherhood. As a result, when local activists wielded maternalist language, they did not simply reify the existing image of a good mother. Instead they attempted to subvert this image and to construct an alternative ideal that incorporated welfare recipients as the epitome of good motherhood. Like NWRO activists, local welfare rights group sought to counter the accusation that recipients needed to be compelled to be good mothers. Instead they argued that it was politicians through their welfare reform bills and work requirements who undermined relationships between mothers and children. For example, Lois Walker, in an article for the Virginia Welfare Rights Organization, recalled that: 'I was told that if I didn't work my children would be taken away. The welfare department really had forced me to leave my five children with just any unreliable babysitter' but 'I learned my rights by being an ADC mother'.¹⁷¹ In making statements like this, activists positioned themselves as the moral defenders of children's interests and the protectors of good motherhood and contested attempts to exclude them from the debate on welfare reform.

¹⁷⁰ E. Boris, *Power of Motherhood*, *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, pp.27-28.

¹⁷¹ Quoted in VWRO Newsletter, December 1970, Folder 3, Box 27, Wiley Papers.

Furthermore, as Molly Ladd Taylor argues, maternalists were ‘convinced that they were naturally sensitive to the needs of children because of their capacity for motherhood’.¹⁷² In contrast, welfare mothers based their activism on experiential knowledge rather than any innate femininity. They claimed that they were best positioned to understand and interpret the interests of poor children, and poor families generally, because as mothers living in poverty they knew what would help welfare recipients. These campaigns were not abstract but very much connected to their daily lives and the struggle for survival. On a national level this line of argument clearly manifested itself in the tensions between the NWRO and other women’s rights groups. However, at a grassroots level, it manifested itself more clearly in the actions and agendas of local groups.

Local welfare rights groups, particularly those less tightly connected to the NWRO, regularly dealt with issues beyond those directly linked to welfare payments. They recognized that poor single mothers dealt with a whole range of issues as a result of their social location and often had a much more fluid agenda in which welfare recipients were trusted to define their own needs. For example, Andrea Kidd recalls welfare mothers at the BWAC in 1968 arguing that ‘we need clothes for our kids. They are freezing in the streets and you have to do something’. BWAC therefore started a credit campaign targeting local department stores which aimed to use pressure from these local businesses to force the state to provide recipients with a school clothing allowance.¹⁷³ Similarly, in an interview, Roxanne Jones, chair of Southwark Mead WRO, explained that her welfare rights group first launched a campaign to convince the Salvation Army to give welfare recipients help buying Christmas items for their children. While this had little to do with the

¹⁷² M. Ladd Taylor, *Mother-Work*, p.2.

¹⁷³ Andrea Kidd interview, November 5 1974, Box 25, Kotz Papers.

welfare system directly, it allowed the group to recruit participants because this issue ‘was something personal and we needed it and it was something that inspired us’.¹⁷⁴

The examples above highlight one of the tensions between the NWRO and grassroots activists’ in their use of motherhood. While the NWRO was ultimately focused on political change, local groups were equally concerned with personal change and with empowering individual welfare mothers. As a result, the NWRO primarily used motherhood to legitimate its political activism and to claim political space for welfare recipients to define their needs on a national political stage. While grassroots activists clearly used motherhood in a similar way, and generally supported the NWRO in its campaigns against the FAP, some grassroots activists felt that national leaders did not work to help recipients directly enough and that their organization had become too far removed from the lives of recipients. Pennsylvania Welfare Rights Organization, a conglomerate of local, county and city organizations, which included Roxanne Jones’ Southwart Mead WRO, argued that by hiring paid organizers rather than recipients, NWRO perpetuated the idea that welfare mothers’ knowledge and understanding of the system was not valid. As a result, Frankie Mae Jetter and Roxanne Jones, two key figures within the Pennsylvania group, started a campaign against this policy at the 1969 NWRO Convention and led a fight to hire “mothers not pros” on the grounds that their experiential knowledge of welfare meant that they were the “best organizers”.¹⁷⁵ This disagreement was not completely resolved at the convention. Indeed there are multiple references to later tensions between various paid organizers and welfare

¹⁷⁴ Roxanne Jones interview, November 7 1974, Box 25, Kotz Papers.

¹⁷⁵ “Report on 1969 NWRO Convention”, *Allegheny County Welfare Fighter*, December 1970, Folder 3, Box 27, Wiley Papers.

mothers for similar reasons, and many historians have claimed that it was such tensions that helped lead to the eventual collapse of the NWRO.¹⁷⁶

Alongside their use of maternalist language, local welfare rights organizations also attempted to redefine what it meant to be a citizen and what rights citizens were entitled to receive from the state. While local WROs and the NWRO often used language around motherhood in similar ways, there are even great similarities in their use of discourse around citizenship. These similarities reflect the fact that both locally and nationally welfare rights advocates emphasized the commonalities between welfare recipients and other Americans and to argue that their American citizenship gave them equal rights to make claims on the state. Such a discourse left little room for disagreement about how such language should be deployed. Both grassroots and national campaigns repeatedly used it to challenge federal and state governments to recognize that welfare recipients were human beings and American citizens and, as such, to recognize the validity of their views on welfare. In essence they argued that as citizens their needs were legitimate and should be met, and that recipients were best positioned to define what those needs were. As Roberta O'Neil, chairman of the Mission Hill Chapter of Mothers for Adequate Welfare, said 'I am a young woman with new ideas that knows both sides of the story. I have an idea what it is to be human and I know what it is to be a welfare recipient'.¹⁷⁷

Drawing on a discourse similar to that used by the NWRO regarding constitutional rights, local welfare rights groups sought to position themselves as American citizens and to question the state's misrecognition of their needs. This is

¹⁷⁶ Indeed many historians have argued that this disagreement led to the eventual collapse of the NWRO after George Wiley's resignation. See P. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, pp.125-156.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in "State Acts in Mothers' Revolts, *Boston Herald Traveller*, August 6 1968, Folder 11, Box 1, MWRO Papers.

clear from looking at various examples of handbooks published by WROs across the country. These handbooks all clearly draw on the same narrative frame which emphasizes that welfare recipients are citizens and as such are entitled to certain rights. For example, the Iowa 1971 welfare rights handbook warns recipients that ‘You may need to remind yourself and other people who are confused that the purpose of public welfare programs is based on the idea that... all citizens have a legal right to welfare...As a consumer of public welfare you have a role to play in improving welfare for ‘all citizens’.¹⁷⁸ Equally the Michigan WRO newsletter, *Mother Power*, recounts what happened when two of its members met with welfare caseworkers who tried to tell them what they were entitled to: ‘thanks to the author of the Welfare Rights handbook which has given our mothers a very good knowledge of what their rights are...we let them know what we knew was available’.¹⁷⁹ The handbooks often also explicitly connected the local struggle with national priorities. For example, the Iowa handbook reminded members of the importance of the NWRO campaign against FAP and how President Nixon’s plan would keep ‘poor people “second class citizens”’.¹⁸⁰

Local WROs employed both discursive and performative tactics in order to demand their rights as citizens. For example, the *Boston Globe* reports that on September 20 1969 protestors from the state WRO interrupted Robert Finch, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, during his speech at Harvard University to protest FAP. As well as making speeches against FAP, the protestors carried red, white and blue flags with the NWRO logo; held placards calling for a ‘War for the Rights of the People’; and wore buttons reading ‘I support a

¹⁷⁸ *Iowa Welfare Rights Handbook*, 1971, Folder 2, Box 25, Wiley Papers.

¹⁷⁹ “Southeast Mothers Demand their Rights”, *Mother Power*, March 1969, Folder 4, Box 25. Wiley Papers.

¹⁸⁰ *Iowa Welfare Rights Handbook*, 1971, Folder 2, Box 25, Wiley Papers.

guaranteed adequate income for all Americans'.¹⁸¹ Local campaigns often used the NWRO flag, which was designed to mimic the American flag with red and white stripes and the NWRO symbol in place of the stars. Using the flag in this way visually reinforced the idea that welfare recipients were US citizens under the protection of the US flag and drew direct connections between welfare rights activism and the history of other Americans fighting for their rights.

Local WROs reinforced these connections through acts of civil disobedience and protest marches. For example, a roundup of local activities to celebrate the NWRO's third birthday focused on demonstrations across the country by welfare mothers which, in Kansas, led to the deployment of state troopers and armed national guardsmen.¹⁸² Similar events occurred across the country and allowed activists to portray themselves as defenders of traditional American liberties. For example, Raymond Snyder, the child of a welfare mother who confronted state troops in Wisconsin, wrote in a national essay competition for school children that his mother and 'welfare mothers [as a collective] were fighting for their constitutional rights'. He argued that although the Constitution 'guarantees every citizen the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"', in reality 'this is denied to a welfare person'.¹⁸³

As this example suggest, local welfare rights organizations (and the NWRO) blended motherhood and citizenship in order to subvert the social script that denied poor women of color the right to be good mothers or productive citizens and refused to consider that women could be both mothers and citizens. They argued that welfare mothers were citizens and human beings and emphasized

¹⁸¹ "Welfare Activists Disrupt Secretary Hew's Speech", *Boston Globe*, August 3 1968, Folder 11, Box 1, MWRO Papers.

¹⁸² Folder 5, Box 22, Wiley Papers.

¹⁸³ Raymond Snyder, "Dissent - It's Place in America", *Welfare Fighter*, April 1970.

self determination as a right of citizenship. In doing so, they claimed that the state had a duty to recognize and support welfare recipients' right to self-determination, as it would any other citizen, whether that meant supporting full time mothers to raise their family or providing childcare for working mothers who chose wage labor to support her family. For example, MWRO member Mrs William R Brigham wrote to the *Haverhill Gazette* in response to its severe criticism of welfare recipients, particularly stay at home mothers. She argued, 'This program is not mandatory and therefore still recognizes the Article 1 of the original Bill of Rights, that of freedom of choice.'¹⁸⁴ In Snyder's essay mentioned above, entitled 'Dissent – Its Place in America', the author picked up on this thread and explicitly positioned welfare mothers within the history of American protest. Recounting his mother's experiences facing the National Guard at the Wisconsin courthouse, he explicitly included her political acts of civil disobedience as part of her motherly duties. Explaining that his mother kissed them, baked them bread, cleaned, had breakfast with them and then went out to protest, he argued that she confronted the state for him because, as she said, "her Baby's my whole life" and she could not stand by and "see my baby's suffer".¹⁸⁵

On a national level it can be easy to dismiss or minimize the power that this discourse wielded. However, on a local level it is easier to see its successes both legislatively and personally. While the NWRO was fighting the introduction of wholesale structural welfare reform, the distribution of legislative power between federal and state governments meant that on a state level welfare recipients could challenge specific policies and legislative decisions directly. By challenging the hegemonic discourse that criticized mothers alternately for failing to work and for

¹⁸⁴ Mrs William R Brigham, "A Welfare Mother Replies", *Haverhill Gazette*, December 15 1969, Folder 1 2, Box 1, MWRO Papers.

¹⁸⁵ Raymond Snyder, "Dissent – It's Place in America", *Welfare Fighter*, April 1970.

failing to fulfill their parental roles, activists on a local level were able to expose some of the hypocrisies embedded in this discourse and use them to their advantage. Roxanne Jones remembers a dispute in Philadelphia over who could train as VISTA workers. Local welfare rights activists were frustrated with white middle class VISTA volunteers, who they felt were lazy. Instead they wanted the program to train welfare mothers and hire them directly. When the Governor of Pennsylvania refused to allow this, Roxanne recalled that local activists successfully forced him to change his mind. They threatened to write to local papers and expose how he had ‘crucified welfare mothers throughout the country and called them lazy shiftless and no good mothers... [who] did nothing but go out and have illegitimate children’, but then refused to let them train for jobs.¹⁸⁶ Ruby Duncan remembered a similar victory in Nevada after she involved the press when the welfare department told her that her injury would prevent her from entering a work training program¹⁸⁷. Certainly the battle between welfare mothers and the state was unequally weighted, but recipients were far from passive victims. In both of the above cases, they were able to use the state’s own language against it, challenge the state’s misrecognition of them and, in doing so, extract tangible concessions.

As has already been suggested, local WROs had slightly different agendas from the national organization, which directly impacted the way in which they used both motherhood and citizenship in their campaigns. The NWRO was not a direct membership organization and, as such, it was not directly concerned with organizing recipients. Clearly, it had a material interest in increasing the membership of local WROs as its political strength came from the number of

¹⁸⁶ Roxanne Jones interview, November 7 1974, Box 25, Kotz Papers.

¹⁸⁷ Ruby Duncan interview, November 14 1974, Box 24, Kotz Papers.

recipients it could mobilize and on whose behalf it could claim to speak. However, it primarily relied on paid organizers and grassroots organizations to do the actual work of mobilizing recipients and increasing membership. As a result, local welfare rights organizations were much more directly concerned with empowering individual mothers and enabling them to become active participants in the welfare rights movement. As was suggested in chapter two, the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement had laid the groundwork upon which the welfare rights movement was built. However, neither movement was aimed specifically at welfare recipients, and local welfare rights groups still had to make a concerted effort to reach those women whose lives had not been touched by other social movements and who had internalized negative perceptions of themselves. This meant that grassroots organizations had to operate with two audiences in mind and to use language that could both challenge welfare reform policies and build a shared identity among welfare recipients.

As Nancy Fraser argues, there is a ‘tendency in welfare state societies to transform the politics of need interpretation into the management of need satisfaction’ and in doing so to transform poor single mothers into passive recipients of a service rather than active participants making legitimate demands on the state.¹⁸⁸ This is particularly true of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s given that the wider political culture blamed poverty on individual failings and particularly on moral weakness rather than structural economic inequities. This discourse effectively silenced the voices of welfare recipients in the debate on welfare reform. The implications are clear in the recollections of numerous activists, including Joyce Burson, who worked for Brooklyn Welfare Action

¹⁸⁸ N. Fraser, ‘Struggle Over Needs’, in *Women, the State and Welfare*, p.213.

Council before becoming one of only two welfare mothers directly employed in the NWRO national office. Burson recalls that she had ‘grown up to think that welfare was terrible and that people on welfare are terrible’.¹⁸⁹ Equally, Ruby Duncan, who became one of the key leaders of the Nevada welfare rights movement, recalls that her first reaction to being invited to a welfare mothers meeting was to dismiss ‘talk about some welfare rights’ as idiot and ignorant and to unknowingly take ‘the system point of view’ that recipients should just go to work.¹⁹⁰ It was this internalized perception of welfare that local WROs had to challenge and overcome in order to build an organization that could effectively tackle welfare reform on a wider level.

Language played a key role in this process of empowerment because it was in the lives of poor single mothers of color that individual experiences of motherhood and citizenship collided with motherhood and citizenship as social institutions. Language is not just a site of political contestation, it is also a site of identity construction, and it is through language that people bring meaning both to the wider world and to their place within that world. Recipients own definitions of what it meant to be a good citizen or a good mother were shaped by their own experiences but also by the specific historical context and wider political discourse that blamed them for their poverty and denied them the right to be seen as mothers or citizens. As such, redefining what it meant to be a welfare mother was both an internal and external process for local WROs.

The NWRO focused primarily on motherhood and citizenship as legitimating frameworks for their activism and as ways to challenge the state’s representation of welfare recipients and demand a stake in determining welfare

¹⁸⁹ Joyce Burson, Interview with Nick Kotz, [nd], Box 24, Kotz Papers.

¹⁹⁰ Ruby Duncan, interview with Mary Lynn Kotz, November 14 1974, Box 24, Kotz Papers

policy. Grassroots organizations also used these frameworks to empower recipients to recast their own identities. They sought to create active citizens for whom activism was a legitimate and necessary component of their motherhood. For example, Andrea Kidd recalls that this was central to BWAC's approach to welfare organizing. She explained that organizing 'moved into all areas of their life. It was citizenship development. It affected the way that viewed themselves'.¹⁹¹ Welfare rights handbooks and pamphlets emphasized that welfare recipients had rights and that children needed their mothers to exercise these rights for them. The MWRO archives contain numerous examples of this blending of motherhood and citizenship. For example, MWRO printed a poster with a picture of a young African American girl which read 'to protect her rights, learn yours'.¹⁹² Equally, their School Lunch Program pamphlet included a Bill of Rights which reminded readers what children had a right to receive at school and that 'if these rights are being taken away from us, someone is breaking the law and there is something we can do about it'.¹⁹³ Massachusetts was not alone in encouraging mothers to become active on their children's behalf. Johnnie Tillmon recalls how she convinced other welfare mothers to join ANC Mothers Anonymous by telling them that as mothers they could do more than just cook and clean and that welfare rights was 'something else that's beneficial to you and the children'.¹⁹⁴ Other recipients also recall that it was their belief that they could do more for their children that brought them to welfare rights. One recipient told the *Boston Globe*, 'I don't like demonstrating and making a fool of myself...I feel like its lowering myself. But if it will do something for my children I'll do it'. Another recalls: 'I just had to. I had to do something...

¹⁹¹ Andrea Kidd interview, November 5 1974, Box 25, Kotz Papers.

¹⁹² "Join the Fight for Poor Children's' Rights", October 1970, Folder 25, Box 3, MWRO Papers.

¹⁹³ "School Lunch Program Bill of Rights", 1970-1971, Folder 7, Box 33, Wiley Papers.

¹⁹⁴ JohnnieTillmon interview, November 26 1974, Box 26, Kotz Papers.

Really I do it for my kids. I never had a chance and they won't never if I don't do something.¹⁹⁵ For these women, maternalist language did not just allow them to challenge state policies, but also actively helped to bring their own identities as good mothers and citizens into being.

In her work on community activists in the War on Poverty, Nancy Naples talks about active citizenship and how women felt that they achieved citizenship through their activism.¹⁹⁶ The same sense is visible in the words of welfare mothers who talk about how participation in welfare rights changed their own understanding of their identity and of what it meant to be a good mother and a good citizen. Etta Horn explains that before she was involved in welfare rights she felt that she had been 'a good welfare recipient and a good mother... meaning minding my own business and staying dumb as ever... that's the way I felt, you're a good person. You're a good American'. She describes her first welfare rights meeting as 'something very beautiful' where for the first time she saw 'people, poor people, really coming together to do something and to change, say to this country, we have a right to be heard. And our rights are not for sale'. Similarly, Joyce Burson explains that what she really valued about her participation in welfare rights was that it really made her believe that 'you are okay, you're a person'.¹⁹⁷ As Rhode Island Fair Welfare Organization claimed in its 1970 handbook, 'welfare recipients all over the country tell similar stories about a gradual personality shift'.¹⁹⁸ Recognizing the personal transformations inspired by local WRO organizing demands a fundamental shift in our analysis of the movement. It is not sufficient to

¹⁹⁵ "Colored and White: We Want the Same", *Boston Globe*, November 11 1968, Folder 8, Box 2, MWRO Papers; Quoted in G. Martin, *Emergence and Development of a Social Movement*, Folder 5, Box 22, Wiley Papers.

¹⁹⁶ N. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors*, p.3.

¹⁹⁷ Etta Horn interview, 20th November 1974, Box 24, Kotz Papers; Joyce Burson interview, [nd], Box 24, Kotz Papers.

¹⁹⁸ *Rhode Island Welfare Handbook*, 1970, Box 15, Kotz Papers.

focus solely on the national stage or the failings of the NWRO. The welfare rights movement may not have won the wider battle to redefine what it meant to be a welfare mother or to establish a lasting legitimate claim to shape the direction of welfare policy. However, for the welfare mothers discussed above, it did succeed in redefining their own sense of identity.

Claiming the right to be seen as good mothers and good citizens was extremely powerful for individual recipients and their participation in welfare rights organizations often impacted the rest of their lives. Some women, such as Ruby Duncan, spent years as community activists working to fight poverty; and local welfare rights organizations often outlasted the NWRO. Language is not itself intrinsically repressive or emancipatory and it must be understood in relation to the social locations and identities of those who wield it. The narrative framings adopted by the NWRO and by local welfare rights organizations might appear to reify traditional female identities. However, as this chapter demonstrates, for the women involved, such language provided a powerful tool that helped them reconceptualise the way they understood the world and their place in it. Personal empowerment may not be sufficient on its own to fundamentally challenge the hegemonic discourse on welfare, but it is a necessary precursor to building a national movement that is capable of doing so. The efforts of mothers involved in the welfare rights movement to create a new collective identity that was anchored in their own intersectional positions and which demanded recognition of their authority and knowledge as mothers and citizens was both radical and, for recipients themselves, often effective.

'Society in general feel that people who are on welfare are, really have no name, they are nameless, they are statistics instead of human beings, so we thought anonymous fit us quite well'.

Johnnie Tillmon, Executive Director of the NWRO, Founding Member of Los Angeles Welfare Rights group, ANC Mothers Anonymous, explaining why they chose that name.¹⁹⁹

Conclusion: The Decline of the Welfare Rights Movement

The purpose of this thesis has been to examine how language concerning motherhood and citizenship was mobilized by competing groups in the debates over the introduction of a guaranteed adequate income in the United States in the early 1970s. Focusing on three different arenas - the federal government, the National Welfare Rights Organization, and local welfare rights groups – it has argued that reclamation of motherhood and citizenship by welfare recipients was both necessary and radical given the hegemonic discourse on welfare. Welfare recipients, drawing on their own experiences at the intersections of race, gender and class, criticized FAP for perpetuating the idea that poverty was the result of moral failings and not structural inequalities, and demanded that the state radically rethink its treatment of single mothers. They wielded language around motherhood and citizenship in order to challenge and undermine the dominant image of immoral welfare mothers as responsible for poverty and social deprivation, and to legitimize their claims on the state. Ultimately, they demanded that the state recognize its obligations to welfare recipients as citizens and demanded that, as citizens, the state recognize their right to self-determination, whether that meant being a full time mother who was financially supported by the state or being a working mother employed in a job that allowed her to support her family.

There has long been a fractious relationship between feminism and motherhood which has led some feminists to suggest that using maternalist rhetoric cannot help but reinforce traditional gender identities. However, as Nancy Fraser, and other

¹⁹⁹ JohnnieTillmon interview, November 26 1974, Box 26, Kotz Papers.

feminist theorists have argued, language is ‘neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently repressive’. Instead its meaning is contested and must be analyzed within the specific historical context in which it is deployed and in light of the social locations of those wielding it.²⁰⁰ Certainly legislators did use motherhood and citizenship in order to further their own conservative agenda. For example, by invoking the sacred mother-child bond, President Nixon and conservative members of Congress were able to block the passage of the Comprehensive Child Development Act at the same time as using the image of the good productive American citizen to agitate for punitive work requirements for welfare mothers. By exploiting the tangled relationship between motherhood, citizenship and the state, conservative legislators were able to use these images of mothers and citizens simultaneously and ignore the reality that these two identities collided in the lives of welfare mothers. In doing so, they trapped recipients in an unwinnable situation in which they were either condemned as unproductive citizens if they chose to raise their children or condemned as bad mothers if they chose to work.

However, for welfare recipients themselves, primarily poor single mothers of color, who lived with a history of slavery and sexual violence and who had been consistently excluded from both the status of good mother and legitimate citizen, wielding these narrative framings was both radical and empowering. As the campaign against FAP demonstrates, by exposing the hypocrisies in the conservative discourse on welfare, recipients were able to use these narrative framings to challenge their public perception and to demand a radically new relationship between recipients and the state. Recipients were able to draw on the long histories that motherhood and citizenship had as ways of legitimating public

²⁰⁰ N. Fraser, ‘Struggle Over Needs’, *Women, the State and Welfare*, p.221.

protest and situate their own activism within these traditions. At the same time, however, their intersectional identities meant that the ways in which they deployed this language was clearly distinct from these earlier traditions. In particular, mothers redefined existing maternalist vocabulary, which had previously been wielded by middle class women, and instead sought to construct a universal shared maternal identity on their own terms through which they could overcome the state's deliberate misrecognition of their claims. They positioned themselves as the inheritors of a long tradition of American mothers and citizens acting to claim their constitutional rights in order to challenge the idea that welfare recipients were either unfit mothers or undeserving citizens. At the same time, welfare rights activists also mobilized motherhood and citizenship in order to empower individual welfare mothers. As the previous chapter demonstrated, welfare recipients themselves internalized the hegemonic discourse around welfare that depicted them as bad mothers and unproductive citizens. Reclaiming these two identities and positioning welfare recipients as the epitome of good motherhood enabled activists to build a movement that had the numerical strength and resources to successfully challenge legislators at a state and federal level and to demand that their voices be heard and their needs recognized.

Fundamentally, the welfare rights movement was both successful and unsuccessful in its campaign against the Family Assistance Plan. In the short term, the FAP was defeated. Changing domestic and international political priorities combined with opposition from the left fanned by the NWRO, and opposition from the right fanned by southern Democrats afraid that FAP would cut off their supply of cheap labor, led President Nixon to abandon FAP in 1972.²⁰¹ Yet, despite their

²⁰¹ J. Quadagno, "Race, Class and Gender", *American Sociological Review*, p.27.

success in defeating FAP, the NWRO were unable to pressure legislators into introducing wholesale welfare reform. The Adequate Income Act never passed the House and the NWROs Guaranteed Annual Income plan was soon forgotten as debate on welfare reform bills swung dramatically to the right in the aftermath of the 1972 Presidential election. Through the late 1970s and 1980s the political scene became increasingly hostile towards the poor and towards welfare recipients in particular. At both a local and a national level, increasingly restrictive measures were introduced to try and reduce the number of people on the welfare rolls and liberal anti-poverty agendas were widely seen as discredited and ineffective. By the time that welfare reform became a domestic priority again in the 1990s, the political ground had shifted so dramatically to the right that the idea of any kind of federal income floor was no longer politically tenable.

Indeed changing political circumstances and increasing internal tensions meant that the NWRO itself became increasingly isolated in the mid-1970s. As Premilla Nadasen has shown in her work on the NWRO, conflicts between George Wiley, the national staff, and the recipient leaders on the Executive Board became increasingly destructive.²⁰² At the heart of this conflict was a fundamental disagreement about the direction in which the NWRO should move. As a specifically gendered and racialized form of public hostility towards welfare recipients grew, George Wiley argued that it was necessary to widen the NWRO's remit to include all poor people rather than just welfare recipients. However, Beulah Sanders and Johnnie Tillmon, among others, objected to what they saw as the marginalization of poor mothers of color and instead argued that recipients themselves should have more direct control over the NWRO. This culminated in

²⁰² P. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, p.196.

George Wiley's resignation in 1972 after which Johnnie Tillmon assumed the role of Executive Director. Wiley then established the Movement for Economic Justice to address poverty as a whole, and Tillmon took the NWRO in a more explicitly feminist direction, agitating on subjects like reproductive rights as well as the welfare system. Ultimately, the NWRO could not continue in the hostile political climate and without the financial backing that had been forthcoming earlier in the decade and it collapsed as a national organization by 1974.

Yet anticipating the future of a movement ignores the hope that sustained activists in their belief, well founded or not, that their efforts, their campaigning, and their energy could transform society in the way that they wished. It also diminishes the real impact that participation in the NWRO had on welfare mothers who were able to extract tangible concessions from the state through their collective organizing and assert their own independent identities as mothers, citizens and activists in the face of continued state misrecognition. While the NWRO's strategy did not, in the end, lead to the fundamental welfare reform that welfare rights activists wanted, by claiming their right to speak as mothers and as citizens, welfare recipients articulated a radical position that fundamentally challenged prevailing historic and social assumptions about who counted as a mother and as a citizen and started an important debate about what motherhood and citizenship meant in the United States that continues to have significant relevance today. This discourse went deeper than simply demanding that welfare recipients have the right to choose how they lived their lives, though the right to make those choices was a key part of the debate. Instead, it demanded that Americans consider what it means to be a mother or a citizen in the US and started an important debate about how society values and positions these groups. It challenged the dominant

understanding of the relationship between citizenship, motherhood and work and very nearly revolutionized assumptions about what the state has a duty to provide for its citizens.

A feminist epistemology encourages self-reflexivity and an awareness of the limitations of any study and I am aware that the nature of archival research limits the contemporary insights that this project can reach. In focusing specifically on exploring how welfare recipients in the 1960s and 1970s used language to challenge their marginalization and to claim the right to participate in debates on welfare reform, it is easy to impose rigid chronological boundaries that did not necessarily exist. Certainly, at a local level, as Todd Carty Shaw has shown, welfare rights groups continued to exist after the collapse of the NWRO and continued to empower and embolden recipients to make demands of the state. Despite the collapse of the NWRO, key organizers maintained a basic activist network, protest repertoire and collective identity that enabled welfare rights activism to re-emerge in the late 1980s.²⁰³ Equally, as I have tried to suggest earlier, an archival approach can privilege the experiences of certain groups. For example, northern welfare rights groups are much more heavily represented in this thesis than southern groups because of their close links with the national organization. In taking this project forward, there is considerable potential to consider contemporary welfare rights organizations like the Madison Welfare Warriors or the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in Philadelphia and to consider how such groups seek to challenge the contemporary discourse on welfare which continues to deny them the right to speak.

²⁰³ T. Carty Shaw, 'We Refused to Lay Down Our Spears: The Persistence of Welfare Rights Activism, 1966-1996', in *Black Political Organizations in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Eds. O. Johnson, K. Stanford, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp.170-193.

Ultimately, as the introduction to this thesis suggested in highlighting the role that maternalist language has played in the 2012 Presidential election, the relationship between motherhood, citizenship and the state remains contested and the questions that welfare right activists in the 1970s raised remain unresolved. The political spectrum has drifted substantially to the right since the debate over a guaranteed income and the demonization of welfare recipients remains a deeply embedded narrative. In many ways too little has changed since Johnnie Tillmon spoke about the anonymity of welfare mothers in society, as quoted in the epigraph to this conclusion. For example, Ann Romney appealed to working mothers, single mothers, divorced mothers and stay at home mothers, welfare mothers were noticeably absent from her speech. Equally, Michelle Obama's claim that "Mom in Chief" is her most important role masks the fact that President Obama has done little to challenge the punitive work requirements that deny welfare recipients the right to raise their children. In US society, welfare recipients' needs remain marginalized and this is something that feminism must continue to tackle aggressively. Forty years after the Family Assistance Plan was abandoned in Congress, the NWRO's core message remains relevant to feminists and to wider society: 'the inadequacies of most government programs to aid poor people result in large part from the fact that little or no consideration is given to the views, the needs, or the interests of those affected by the programs'.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ NWRO Testimony before Fiscal Policies Subcommittee of the Joint Economic Committee, June 12 1968, Folder 4, Box 22, GW Papers.

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