



POVERTY, BATTERED WOMEN, AND
WORK IN U.S. PUBLIC POLICY

LISA D. BRUSH

OXFORD

Poverty, Battered Women, and Work in U.S. Public Policy

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A quick guide to style, usage, and notation: Texts in *italics* signal emphasis, introduce a concept, are in a language other than English (as in *sādhakas*), or mark the title of a book (Stark's *Coercive Control*). Double quotation marks ("...") enclose text directly quoted from another text or speaker. Materials in quotation marks include responses to open-ended questions from the interviews and field notes recorded during and immediately after interview and community literacy project sessions. Edits for clarity or to preserve anonymity within quoted material are in [square brackets]. Single quotation marks ('...') distinguish the enclosed text as everyday speech or technical terms in expert discourse.

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Lisa D. Brush
Pittsburgh, PA
November 1, 2010
(Happy 10th Birthday, Jack!!)

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Introduction

In the summer of 2001, Alice¹ was 35, the divorced mother of two teenagers. Although employed off and on throughout her adult life and in spite of having worked 36 weeks of the previous year, she depended on public assistance to make ends meet and especially to provide health benefits to help her manage her diabetes.

Alice had outlasted relationships with two abusive men. The father of her older child was so determined to register his outrage over having to provide child support that he showed up one time while she was at work and, as Alice put it, “made an idiot out of himself while I cried.” She felt that he was “jealous and scared that I’d find someone else” at work, which she deduced from his snide comments while she prepared for work. He implied that she was preparing to meet other men, when she was just getting ready to go to work by putting on “different makeup or getting dressed up, [wearing a] different pair of shoes.” Of the father of her younger child, Alice noted: “When I was at home, I was raising *his* daughter, and he could control me. But [when I was working] out in the real world, he got even more possessive. He would leave his job to check up on me.” He used to show up almost daily and would “call 20 times in an hour” when Alice was at work. He told her that “if it weren’t for me, nobody else would want you.” In what Alice considered the most severe incident of physical abuse that she had experienced, which occurred about four years before the interview, the father of her younger child (by whom she was at that point again pregnant) “beat me so bad I lost the pregnancy. Just pounded on me. I think he wanted to kill me.” She said he was “possessive, abusive, and didn’t want me to work.”

Alice self-identified as White and had been on welfare twice for a total of 31 months. She was one of 40 Allegheny County women enrolled in May–June 2001 in a job search or “work-first” program. Enrollment in this program was part of maintaining their eligibility for welfare after Congress rescinded federal entitlements to income support for poor mothers and their children with the Personal Responsibility Act (PRA) of 1996.² The summer of 2001 was an opportune time to listen to Alice and the other members of her cohort³ in order to learn about their experiences with relationships, welfare, and work in the context of dramatic shifts in the rules and rhetoric, practices, and policies of income support for poor mothers and their children. Political firefights about whether and how to abolish welfare had shifted into what turned out to be a heated four-year debate over reauthorizing the PRA. Under President George W. Bush, reauthorization ultimately incorporated stricter work requirements and an even greater emphasis on marriage, abstinence,

and other elements of what political scientist Anna Marie Smith calls the “sexual regulation” of poor women.⁴ By the middle of 2001, the time limits, work requirements, paternity establishment and child support enforcement provisions, and other elements of the repeal of entitlements set in place in early 1997 had become routine. The initial plunge in the number of welfare enrollees had ended, partly due to the weakening of the economy; the country was slipping into a recession after the relatively high-growth period of the 1990s. Nationwide, welfare caseloads had declined from 5 million families receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1994 to 4.4 million in 1996, when entitlements were repealed, and then plummeted to 2.1 million in March 2001.⁵ Yet welfare caseloads had increased significantly (averaging over 10 percent among the 34 states showing an increase) in two thirds of 49 states and the District of Columbia between March 2000 and March 2001. By the summer of 2001, when I met Alice, the steady and steep decline in the welfare rolls was over.⁶

Locally, enrollments had stabilized in the work-first program, where Alice engaged in the work-related activities that maintained her eligibility for cash support. Some program participants were there because 24 months had passed since the time limit “clock” started ticking and work requirements were kicking in. Others were there because welfare office caseworkers were sending even new applicants with very young children to job preparation and job search programs. Through the process known as “diversion,” case managers and other low-level bureaucrats charged with determining eligibility for welfare were shifting welfare applicants from public assistance to work programs (or directly into the labor market).⁷ Either way, Alice and the other members of her cohort were grappling with the consequences of Bill Clinton’s (first as a candidate and then as president) pledge to “end welfare as we know it.”⁸ Their experiences and voices speak to the specifics of an especially interesting time and place, to the realities of poor women in Allegheny County in the summer of 2001 and the 12 to 18 months that followed, when my research team conducted follow-up interviews. These women’s lives also speak to a central question on the minds of advocates, researchers, and administrators alike, the question that motivates this book: How do we understand battering—that is, the physical violence and control men perpetrate on their current and former wives and girlfriends⁹—as a factor in women’s poverty, in women’s compliance with welfare eligibility requirements, and in women’s progress toward safety and solvency through waged work?

Georgia, one of the 33 self-identified Black women enrolled in the program along with Alice and with whom we spoke in the summer of 2001, was also 35 and a mother of two. Both of her children were diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). One child had received Social Security disability benefits for a while but had been, as Georgia put it, “cut off” when disability eligibility criteria were also tightened to encourage work rather than welfare, even for mothers caring for children with physical and mental health problems. Georgia had held 10 different jobs as a working adult and had not worked at all in the past year. Three times, for a cumulative total of more than 16 years, Georgia and her children had been on welfare. She, too, was dealing with health problems of her own: Georgia was recovering from open-heart surgery.

Georgia had been involved with what she called “a very abusive man” from whom she had separated by the time of her interview in 2001. He was trained as a boxer; was, as she put it, “involved with drugs”; and was extremely controlling. For example, Georgia said, “He wouldn’t let me close a door in the house,” even to use the toilet, a tactic that undermined her privacy and dignity and extended her partner’s surveillance and control to her bodily functions.¹⁰ Georgia’s partner also tried to enforce her domesticity and extend his control over her by interfering with her employment. He was so jealous that he “didn’t want me to work or meet people outside the home,” Georgia explained. “He would call or come to the job or be there when I got off. He would demand that I come over, would call and threaten the boss when I worked at [a fast food chain]. He stole a VCR from the [discount retailer] where I was working.” Her partner’s actions had consequences both for him (her employer threatened to have him arrested) and for Georgia (she was fired because of his behavior).

ALICE AND GEORGIA IN CONTEXT

Alice and Georgia were not alone in their experiences of poverty and abuse. Three quarters of the 40 welfare recipients who started in the mandatory work-first program along with Georgia and Alice—all of whom we interviewed¹¹—said their former or current husband or boyfriend seemed jealous about the possibility of their meeting someone new at work or job training. Their partners’ fears about women’s sexual betrayal, their ideas about proper femininity, and their actions to enforce women’s domesticity and sexual fidelity joined a long list of reasons why many of these women had trouble using waged work to establish and maintain safety and solvency in their lives. Spotty work histories, low wages, unstable housing, very young children, poor physical and mental health, sole responsibility for housekeeping and childrearing, and low educational attainment were typical of the women we interviewed, as they are for welfare recipients across the United States.¹² The pseudonyms and some basic characteristics of all 40 women are arrayed in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 provides a bird’s-eye view of the women who are at the heart of Chapter 3, all of whom started in the work-first program with Georgia and Alice. For example, the age distribution of women enrolled with Alice and Georgia is *bimodal*. That is, instead of calculating just one average age for these 40 women, it is more revealing to observe that there are two main age groups: women in the 18-to-21 range (relatively new mothers) and women in the 30-to-35 range (Alice and Georgia among them). In fact, almost two thirds of the women enrolled in this program were older than 30 in the summer of 2001. The relatively high average age suggests that a significant proportion of the caseload is longer-term welfare recipients, which is not surprising given the general decline in welfare caseloads since the 1996 reforms. That is, those who remain on welfare at this point, and especially those who, like the women in the study, recently entered a work-first program, are either relatively new mothers or older women who face significant barriers to employment.¹³ Table 1.1 also provides some context for

Table 1.1 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS (N = 40)

	Race- ethnicity	Marital status at interview	Age <20 at first birth	Age at interview (years)	Weeks worked past year	Hourly wage @ initial interview	Hourly wage @ last interview	Abused at work	Ever filed for PFA*
Alice	White	Divorced	Yes	35	36	\$7.25	\$6.25	Yes	Yes
Angela	Black	Never married	No	34	0	\$7.25	\$7.50	No	No
Barbara	Black	Never married	Yes	39	44	\$9.50	\$10.00	Yes	Yes
Brenda	Black	Never married	Yes	19	20	\$6.25	—	No	No
Cecilia	Black	Never married	No	32	0	\$0	\$7.00	No	No
Clarice	Black	Divorced	No	40	12	\$5.15	\$9.00	No	No
Dee	Black	Never married	Yes	19	8	\$5.15	\$5.45	No	No
Donna	White	Never married	Yes	22	24	\$6.50	—	Yes	No
Edna	Black	Never married	Yes	22	40	\$6.00	\$0	Yes	Yes
Evelyn	Black	Never married	Yes	21	8	\$7.00	\$5.15	No	No
Frankie	Black	Never married	No	42	0	\$5.15	\$0	No	No
Georgia	Black	Separated	No	35	0	\$6.50	\$9.00	Yes	Yes
Gina	Black	Never married	Yes	30	16	\$10.00	—	Yes	No
Harriet	Black	Never married	No	30	0	\$5.40	\$5.15	Yes	Yes
Hera	Black	Never married	Yes	30	16	\$8.20	—	No	Yes

India	Black	Never married	No	21	10	\$9.00	\$8.00	No	No
Irene	Black	Never married	Yes	19	36	\$5.35	\$8.50	No	No
Janice	Black	Never married	Yes	30	36	\$8.00	\$9.00	No	No
Josie	Black	Never married	Yes	45	40	\$7.00	\$6.00	No	No
Karen	White	Never married	Yes	18	36	\$5.15	\$0	No	No
Keshauna	Black	Never married	No	22	0	\$0	\$0	No	No
Kiesha	Black	Never married	Yes	28	52	\$8.00	\$8.59	No	No
Larnice	Black	Never married	No	22	4	\$9.00	—	Yes	Yes
Lashauna	Black	Never married	Yes	21	8	\$6.10	\$7.25	No	Yes
Latoya	Black	Never married	No	33	48	\$8.25	—	No	No
Marketta	Black	Never married	Yes	37	0	\$7.25	—	No	No
Mary	White	Divorced	Yes	41	43	\$7.50	\$8.25	No	No
Mattie	Black	Never married	Yes	19	14	\$6.50	\$6.00	No	No
Nancy	White	Divorced	Yes	43	24	\$8.65	—	No	Yes
Noa	Black	Never married	Yes	21	20	\$6.00	\$7.00	No	No
Odelle	Black	Divorced	Yes	35	26	\$13.00	\$10.50	No	No
Pat	Black	Never married	Yes	20	24	\$5.15	\$5.15	Yes	Yes
Philippa	Black	Never married	No	29	16	\$10.25	—	No	No
Reena	Black	Divorced	No	37	36	\$11.60	\$6.25	Yes	Yes

(continued)

Table 1.1 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS (N = 40) (CONTINUED)

	Race-ethnicity	Marital status at interview	Age <20 at first birth	Age at interview (years)	Weeks worked past year	Hourly wage @ initial interview	Hourly wage @ last interview	Abused at work	Ever filed for PFA*
Ruth	Black	Never married	No	36	24	\$10.51	\$10.51	No	No
Sally	White/ Native American	Separated	No	44	0	\$6.00	\$6.00	No	Yes
Serena	Black	Divorced	Yes	39	0	\$9.13	\$12.06	No	No
Tonya	Black/Irish/ Indian	Divorced	Yes	41	24	\$6.50	\$8.00	No	No
Tyronda	Black	Separated	No	33	20	\$7.50	\$5.15	No	Yes
Virginia	Black	Separated	No	43	35	\$6.00	\$0	Yes	Yes

*In Allegheny County, the courts call a civil restraining order against an abusive partner an order of Protection From Abuse (PFA).

understanding the obstacles to work that Alice, Georgia, and the other women enrolled in this work-first program face.

Limited work histories: At the time of the retrospective interviews, three quarters of the women enrolled in this mandatory work-first program had worked at least one week during the previous calendar year. However, in addition to the one in five who did not work at all during the previous year, one in four worked fewer than four months of the year. Thus, a significant proportion of these work-first program participants have limited work histories.

Limited occupations: Most work-first enrollees had been employed most recently doing “women’s work” in the service sector. That is, they worked in retail sales, clerical work, data entry, food preparation and service, nonprofessional health service, cleaning, or personal services.

Low pay: Virtually all of the women we interviewed earned the low wages typically associated with “women’s work.” In the retrospective interviews, the mean hourly wage was \$7.55 for the most recent job. Although significantly above the minimum wage, the value of this level of earnings was below the “living wage” standard being debated at the time in Allegheny County. These earnings are unlikely to lift single mothers above the poverty line or enable them to leave either welfare or abusive intimates, especially if they are unable to work full time.

Unstable employment: Employment for Alice, Georgia, and many of the women we interviewed has been highly unstable. At the time of the retrospective interviews, they averaged four jobs since age 16, and more than one third had held six or seven jobs since they turned 16 (a large number both for those who had not been in the labor force long because they are young mothers and for those who had only entered the labor force relatively recently). The rate at which the regional economy generates job openings in largely low-wage occupations with little upward mobility outstrips the rate at which it generates jobs in higher-paid, full-time, stable occupations with direct connections to internal labor markets or job ladders. As a result, most welfare recipients cycle off and on welfare and in and out of work and remain poor either way, subject to the “churn” at the bottom of the labor market.

Household composition and support: Three quarters of the women we interviewed along with Alice and Georgia live alone with their children. Women who live alone cannot depend even theoretically on a coresident adult for consistent help with housekeeping and childcare responsibilities. The remaining women live with one or two other adults, most frequently a grown child, an intimate partner, or their own mother.

Relationships: Two thirds of the women enrolled with Georgia and Alice had never been married.¹⁴ None of the remaining third were legally married or involved in a common-law relationship; all were divorced or separated. Women reported a variety of reasons why their relationships ended. The reasons for the breakups (including breakups with the fathers of their

children as well as other significant relationships) sometimes included violence and control. The single most common reason was the partner's infidelity, which was the reason for breakup in nearly one in three instances.¹⁵

Lack of child support and paternal responsibility: Over half of the 37 women no longer with the father of their first child received no cash or gifts for their children from the children's fathers. Twenty-eight of the 40 mothers received no formal child support payments. The majority of fathers who do not pay child support are unemployed, incarcerated, or missing altogether. Nearly one fourth of respondents who gave a reason for not having formal child support said they had no support order. Forty-one percent of the women reported that the child support order was not enforced. *One program participant said explicitly that she was trying to avoid contact with an abusive former intimate.*

Teen childbearing: Six in 10 of the current respondents reported becoming mothers for the first time when they were teenagers, that is, by age 20. The average age at first birth in this group was 19 years old. Half were between 16 and 19, and only four were very young (15 or younger). About a third postponed their first birth until they were 21 or older.

Young children: Twenty-three percent of the women had an infant younger than 1 year old at the time of the retrospective interview. Nearly two thirds had either an infant or a preschool-age child at home. A sizable minority (43 percent) have children by more than one man. Of those, two thirds (65 percent) were teenagers when they gave birth to their first child. The relatively high rates of recent job experience in this study are even more remarkable given the large proportion of respondents who have preschool-age children.

Table 1.1 also shows that 35 percent of the women in the program with Georgia and Alice reported having filed a civil order of protection against their partner in at least one relationship. Four of the 20 women who were in relationships at the time of the retrospective interviews had filed a restraining order in the course of that current relationship. All told, *13 percent of the women enrolled in work-first programs at this site in May–June 2001 were currently in relationships with men against whom they had at one point or another filed restraining orders.*¹⁶

Understanding the lives and specifically the work histories of Alice, Georgia, and other welfare recipients is complicated because many of the factors that contribute to poverty and constitute hurdles in a woman's transition from welfare to work are also associated with abuse. There are complex feedback loops and convoluted cause–effect patterns between abuse and the factors that often lead women to resort to welfare. Abuse is associated with early childbearing, *and* early childbearing can make women vulnerable to both poverty and abuse. Truncated education, limited work, low wages, and the resulting economic dependency contribute to abuse, *and* (as I show in this book) abusers often interrupt women's learning, earning, and complying with the work requirements instituted by Congress in the 1996 legislation. Women's gendered caring responsibilities—for themselves, their households,