

Welfare Workers and Clients

By Barbara Blouin

L'article ci-dessous est tiré du rapport rédigé par l'auteure en 1989 et intitulé « Women and Children Last: Single mothers on Welfare in Nova Scotia ». Le rapport a été produit avec l'aide de Women's Action Coalition of Nova Scotia. Il est basé sur des entrevues avec 30 mères célibataires des quatre coins de la Nouvelle-Écosse et 55 travailleuses et travailleurs, administratrices et administrateurs sociaux, des travailleuses et travailleurs d'aide aux enfants, d'avocates et d'avocats de l'aide juridique et de travailleuses et travailleurs en foyers de transition.

The following article is an excerpt from the author's 1989 report, Women and Children Last: Single Mothers on Welfare in Nova Scotia, produced with the support of the Women's Action Coalition of Nova Scotia. The report is based on interviews with 30 single mothers throughout Nova Scotia and 55 social assistance workers and administrators, child protection workers, legal aid lawyers and transition house workers.

Powerful workers, powerless clients, and the information gap

Policies with a lot of built-in discretion give welfare workers too much power. On the other side of the desk, welfare recipients have almost no power. Most of the women in [this] study were unaware of the few rights they did have. Participants were asked whether their workers had given them information about their rights. A number of women had trouble understanding this question. Some of them said, "What rights?" or "I didn't know I had any." When the woman did not under-

stand the question, the researcher would clarify it: Had they been told that they had the right to appeal if their assistance was reduced or stopped?, and so on.

Social assistance workers are supposed to tell clients of their right to appeal. Other kinds of information should also be given when applicable. For example, a woman who is not receiving maintenance from the father of her children should be told how she can recover the lost income. Women receiving Family Benefits should be told about the Career Planning Program. Since many kinds of benefits are not included in the basic allowance, clients should also be told how they can apply for these special needs benefits.

Patterns of power: sexism and paternalism

Because welfare workers have so much power and recipients have so little, it's easy for workers to control their clients. It is striking how much the patterns of power that emerge from participants' descriptions of the ways their workers treated them resemble patterns of power that are characteristic of many relationships between men and women and many relationships between parents and children. Several of the welfare workers who issued monthly cheques to the women in the study dominated these women in the same ways that husbands can dominate their wives, and parents can dominate their children.

It would be easy to oversimplify the reality. Women too can be sexist in their attitudes toward other women. What counts is whether the worker is acting from attitudes that are sexist and authoritarian toward welfare recipients, or from

attitudes that are nonsexist and democratic.

Marie:

Social assistance is based on the notion that women need help and can't make decisions. The system makes you feel like you've failed at your role in life, which is to catch a man, keep him, and have children.

Connie:

My worker once told me, 'You ought to stay at home and make a proper home atmosphere for your children. It's perfectly all right to stay on Family Benefits. I said, 'How can staying home and being a screaming, frantic, worried shrew about money possibly create a proper home atmosphere for my children?' And he answered, "That's the problem with you young mothers today."

Jessie:

My worker is very strict. It's like being with my parents when I was younger. They controlled my life. Now, instead of my parents controlling my life, the worker controls my life. I hate it. It's tempting even now to go back to my husband [who beat her and tried to strangle her].

Paternalistic and sexist attitudes such as these give women on welfare the message that they are not capable of taking charge of their own lives, and even that they are expected *not* to take charge of their lives. Injustice, in whatever form, takes away a

Problems of Sexism and Paternalism

person's dignity and confidence.

Control by humiliation

An all-too-common part of the pattern of paternalism and sexism is the use of humiliation to control women.

Jessie:

By the time I left his office, I'd feel small enough to walk out under the door.

Gail:

I called my worker to ask him for some money for moving expenses. "Do you have a man?" he asked me. "Yeah," I said, "I do." And he said, "If you have a man and you have five kids, get your man to move you. Don't you believe in birth control pills, or getting your tubes tied?"

Control by mistrust

Single mothers on welfare are controlled by the system that is supposed to serve them, and all too often as well, by the workers who are supposed to help them. The issue of control is a constant theme. Single mothers on welfare are controlled by a general atmosphere of mistrust, an attitude that seems to say, "We expect that you'll try to cheat us, but we won't let you get away with it." They are controlled by a myriad of rules designed to catch cheaters, some of them unnecessary and arbitrary. For example, cohabitation rules often prevent single mothers from enjoying intimate relationships with men. And Family Benefits workers often control single mothers even more harshly than their own

regulations; they make up their own rules, telling clients that they aren't allowed to let their boyfriends stay overnight.

Control by fear

Single mothers are often controlled by their neighbours and landlords, many of whom will phone a social assistance worker at the least suspicion that a woman has a boyfriend overnight. The same neighbours may call a child welfare agency if a woman, unable to pay for a sitter, goes out for an hour and leaves her younger child in the care of her older child. Single mothers are controlled by the everpresent fear that a protection worker may suddenly appear at the door and take away their children. And they are controlled by the paranoia that their Family Benefits workers may drop in at any time.

There are many ways of controlling. Some are subtle and indirect; others are obvious and direct; some are heavyhanded and may be flagrant violations of the workers' own rules. According to one woman in the study as well as two Family Benefits workers, there are social assistance workers who require their female clients to swear on the Bible "to tell the truth and nothing but the truth." Even a patronizing remark from a worker can be almost as damaging to a woman's self-esteem as the Bible technique. When a woman is already feeling powerless and inadequate because she is poor and her children are poor, when she is already feeling looked down upon by people in her community, it doesn't take much to undermine her confidence completely.

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