

“MAXIMUM FEASIBLE PARTICIPATION”: THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY WORK OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN THE ONGOING WAR ON POVERTY

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Although poverty in the United States had existed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, federal efforts to eliminate destitution did not materialize until the Social Security Act of 1935. With this New Deal legislation, the national social safety-net system, known informally as welfare, began. Public assistance has generated a significant amount of controversy throughout the years: the welfare system has opponents who contest it just as vehemently as its proponents support it. Yet no welfare policy may be quite as notorious as the War on Poverty’s Community Action Program (CAP) in the 1960s and its call for “maximum feasible participation.” Many politicians inferred that this phrase meant the radical involvement of poor people at all levels of action, such that traditional power structures would be overturned. Hindsight shows that this insidious belief held little truth. Officials worried about the potential radicalization of the poor, ultimately causing them to move control of the CAPs away from low-income people by the early 1970s. They instead placed authority into the hands of middle class professionals and private leaders. Women, especially activist mothers, comprised a majority of the poor who capitalized upon the CAPs’ opportunities.

Particular attention will be paid to the perspectives of low-income women in this brief narrative of the War on Poverty, as this form of political action best suited their already-existing networks and current unpaid community work. It is for these reasons that indigenous community women were so likely to utilize funding from the CAP. Because of this, I hope to most authentically reflect the experiential knowledge of these women who worked so dedicatedly to

improve their impoverished communities. Despite all the hardship and conflict that community organizing brought them, the CAP proved to be one of the most successful ways to address the needs of low-income peoples in the twentieth century.

I. Community Activism and the War on Poverty

In 1964, President Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), which designated \$947 million to a plethora of services intended to help the poor. Thus began the federal government's War on Poverty. The legislation created new job training programs, youth employment opportunities, adult education classes, rural economic development programs, services for migrant farm workers, and the AmeriCorp VISTA program. It also established legal services for the poor and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). An important part of the EOA was the Community Action Program (CAP), which provided money for the creation of over one-thousand Community Action Agencies (CAAs) to engage poor people's action directly. This specific aspect of the legislation aimed for the controversial "maximum feasible participation" of CAP recipient populations. However, to avoid upsetting the balance of states' rights versus federal law, the EOA included an amendment that governors could veto what they "simply couldn't abide."¹ Furthermore, the CAP language provided for flexibility and a range of interpretations. This elasticity sometimes benefitted poor people in a given area because they were able to control their CAA to best fit their own needs. Yet sometimes the flexibility of CAAs deprived other low-income areas of useful services when municipal and state officials deterred poor people's participation. When this occurred, low-income women, especially mothers, built upon their legacy of successful collective action and strove to improve the CAAs that were supposed to be aiding them.²

Motherist Politics

Despite varying ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, poor women united within their communities through shared poverty experiences.

The CAP afforded them the perfect opportunity to officially become involved in their neighborhoods, as most of these women had participated in informal types of organizing and networking before the War on Poverty. Because of the lack of homogeneity between CAA members and other community organization members, the formal and informal political actions of low-income women had to encompass distinctive facets of identities and incorporate a variety of tactics. Community organizing initiatives previously did not have to consider these two issues.

The activism of middle class, white women has been documented and discussed for years, as their privileged positions permitted these women to write diaries or letters. They also left files and family documents behind. All of these items traditionally have been used as the primary sources of historical information.³ Furthermore, activism typically had been viewed as a potential niche for well-educated women, who could not enter legal work or academics due to gender prohibitions; rarely was it considered as a venue for low-income women's input.⁴ Yet as recent scholarship has branched out and utilized other resources that can better represent members of the lower class—such as oral interviews—narratives now relay previously unheard stories that reveal the ways in which women approached activism: not through their privilege, but through their need.

Low-income women first encountered community work through many different means, but a common thread weaves through all of their personal accounts. Each of these women had grown up under parents who were strongly involved in the community as well. Many of these women spoke highly of their parents, especially their mothers, and expressed regret that public rhetoric painted such negative pictures of lower class women, as this obscured the skills and aptitudes of their mothers.⁵ For these women, just as for their mothers, contributing to one's community and helping those in need was unquestionable. It was part of one's citizenship. Many women first joined a church or school group. A few more first participated in a larger social movement. Sometimes these women worked within already-established organizations, such as a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or a church group. Frequently traditional institutions failed them. This was the case with women like Evelina López Antonetty, a single-mother in the Bronx who first tried, unsuccessfully, to

improve her children's school system through the PTA. She instead had to found her own group, the United Bronx Parents, to better address the core issues revolving around the schools by acquiring CAP funding.⁶ Antonetty's mother had also been actively involved in their neighborhood while Evelina was young. Yet even women whose parents had not begun a tradition of community participation found that activism was impossible to avoid, as their need required these women to serve as tough advocates for their children.

Some women embraced this aspect of motherhood readily. Others expressed trepidation at the start. Etta Horn, a single-mother in Washington, D.C., felt as if she could not devote time to participating in the local welfare rights movement because it would take her away from her family. However, after attending a few meetings, Horn reshaped her view of motherhood. She soon saw her participation with the movement as an integral part to her role as a parent because through it, she helped work toward significant gains for her children. Her "welfare rights activism, like her school and church volunteerism, constituted one avenue to improve the lives of her children, as well as those of poor women and young people throughout the country."⁷ Horn ultimately served as vice-chairman for the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) in 1967.

A woman's many sides to her personality shaped her activism, but at the same time, her community engagement also influenced her mothering. Her politicization affected both directions of her identity. Interestingly, low-income women involved in neighborhood organizing were devoted to improving the lives of all those around them, not just those of their nuclear family. To accurately analyze women and the CAP, one must employ a "broadened definition of motherhood," making sure not to "miss the material conditions that contribute to differing family forms."⁸ This perspective of mothering helps to better understand the motivation behind low-income women's organizing tactics and approaches. It also explains why women sometimes were so willing to give up their paid positions within CAAs: these women had been committed to community work even before the War on Poverty provided financial compensation for them. They were much more concerned with how they could best benefit their community than if they were getting paid for their time.⁹ Yet while this expansive characterization of motherhood contributed

to unifying poor women in their communities, it also isolated middle class female sympathizers. Differing valuation of shared mothering experiences revealed the importance of class in creating cohesion within the movement.

Class Antagonism: The Barriers of Motherist Politics

While large numbers of middle class women joined in the women's movement, most lower class women did not identify with the group. Black men and women had always worked outside of the family, a legacy of slavery and the impoverished conditions freed blacks first encountered toward the end of the nineteenth century. Married and unmarried low-income white women had also been a part of the workforce for decades. Most lower class mothers had never enjoyed the luxury of staying home with their children and still had to assume all the tasks that mothering entailed in addition to their work tasks. These women simply wished for a way to be economically remunerated for their time in the home, the way that married women were compensated through their husband's earnings. Poor women were more concerned with improving the associated economic worth of their work within the home by pushing for welfare programs that would compensate them appropriately, than they were with joining middle class women and their desire to voluntarily seek outside employment.¹⁰ Low-income women and welfare recipients wanted the same privileges afforded to their middle class counterparts.

Historian Cynthia Edmonds-Cady conducted oral interviews with lower class and middle class participants of the welfare rights movement in Detroit. Her accounts reveal that most of the middle class Friends of Welfare Rights groups became involved because of their sentimental perceptions of motherhood. Many of these Friends cited an instance in which they realized that these low-income women were mothers just as they were, and that their struggles revolved around providing for their children. Therefore, "most [middle class women] saw their welfare rights work as an extension of their lives as mothers."¹¹ These women also functioned with a broad definition of motherhood and wide range of people whom they were working to benefit. However, the welfare recipients interviewed did not view their experiences of motherhood as

similar to those of the Friends, nor did they believe this “romanticized vocation” was a worthy means over which they could bond. To poor women, middle class women simply could not understand the struggles that were associated with poor motherhood, regardless of other mothering commonalities, so they maintained distance.¹² Middle class women had to remain on the fringe of the group.

This purposeful disconnect precluded gains that could have been made by reaching out to groups and networks with different resources. Yet low-income women were willing to make this sacrifice in order to create the most authentic membership within poor community organizing. As historian Rose Ernst said, “Experience, defined by the absence of privilege, is what establishe[d] credibility among activists in this movement.”¹³ In these activists’ eyes, political action permitted these women to turn their oppression into knowledge. Their experiences had allowed them to be experts on how antipoverty policies worked or failed. Welfare rights organizations and CAAs still utilized middle class sympathizers, mainly for financial contributions and transportation purposes, but these Friends rarely participated in any decision-making processes. They never assumed any leadership positions in the organizations over which poor people had the utmost control. When women lost power within the CAP, these class dynamics changed, which frustrated them greatly. Even black middle class supporters were excluded from full participation within poor peoples’ movements, as lower class motherist activism did not extend beyond a shared experience of poverty and could not be bridged by common racial experiences. Instead, racial differences only escalated tensions within these groups.

Racial Conflict in Low-Income Community Organizing

One cannot discuss women and their roles as poor mothers without also considering how race affects their identities.¹⁴ Gender, race, and class are not dichotomous; they all combine together to further marginalize a person. Because of this, non-white lower class women felt they had more issues to combat than just food insecurity and the needs for shelter, healthcare, and education. Usually the unique ethnic needs of an African-American community differed from those of a Mexican-American

population, or an Asian-American neighborhood, or even from a Native American reservation's wishes, though each of these minority populations benefitted from CAP funding. While some basic necessities remained the same, the racial experiences of each group of people greatly influenced their local courses of action.

Even before the turn of the century, poor black women had been focused on more needs than their white, low-income counterparts. For example, while nineteenth-century white welfare activists fought for economic recompense for their mothering, so that they would not have to seek outside employment, black communities extended this further and pushed for universal provisions in healthcare, living conditions, and education, which, if provided, would resolve any need to work away from their children. They did not see a need to establish programs that benefitted only a few at the very bottom of the class system. Instead, they thought, why not provide these services for all? Additionally, poor black women were much more concerned with rape and violence against women, as they knew many poor African-American women's lives would not improve, regardless of the social services available, if their home situations were dangerous for the mother or children.¹⁵

The activist paths of black women and white women continued in their own separate directions much of the time. By the War on Poverty, other growing minority groups within the United States complicated potential collaboration even further. Assumptions have generally held that there were rarely any racial alliances in low-income neighborhoods because this is supposedly where racism most prevailed. Yet recent research shows that actually, when necessary, different ethnicities were able to work together to achieve their common goals. In Durham, North Carolina, for example, a low-income program called Operation Breakthrough (OBT) ultimately integrated, so that poor white members and poor black neighborhood residents worked together to provide healthcare and quality elementary education for their children.¹⁶ Unfortunately, racial groups sometimes could not coordinate their efforts. This greatly hindered the overall efficacy of the CAAs or neighborhood initiatives involved. In Los Angeles, the Black freedom struggle and Chicano movement clashed when an African-American CAA director fired a Chicano field director. Though Jones eventually rehired the field director, the CAA's internal

tensions had already escalated, permanently weakening the CAA's overall strength.¹⁷ In the most racially diverse cities, the CAAs accomplished less to address poverty than in the more homogenous poor populations. Nonetheless, these programs still managed to serve their communities as best as possible, as low-income women still saw local activism as the most effective avenue for change.

Although some non-white women, such as Etta Horn, moved beyond their local organizations to contribute to the national welfare rights movement, and others participated in occasional women's liberation or civil rights' activism, most of these low-income women kept their political activity within their geographic localities. They did not feel as if the larger movements reflected their experiences well enough to earn their time and energy. In regards to the civil rights movement, one woman claimed that:

Many of the national African-American leaders did not understand the significance of the community-based struggles for safe housing, adequate medical care and quality education, among others, that were waged in low-income black neighborhoods across the country during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁸

Women may have agreed with the platforms held by these national movements. Yet the concerns of this larger political activism did not match their own activist priorities. It was difficult for poor women to worry about integrated stores if one never had the financial means to travel to such a store or to purchase anything inside. Members of the lower class felt that community work provided ways to tailor activism to their local needs; the CAP allowed them to carve out their own activist niches instead.¹⁹

However, the belief that certain issues did not involve them meant that these community members had created narrow definitions of who belonged to their own political communities, often to the exclusion of sympathetic outsiders. Sometimes, this even alienated indigenous women who were engaged in local activism. One such woman, living in a poor Brooklyn neighborhood, had to obtain an illegal abortion. The procedure left her utterly sick and weak afterwards, but she never felt that her neighbors provided a space for her to discuss this issue, as pro-choice activism was not in the best interests of the community. Because

of this, she had to participate in pro-choice rallies elsewhere to meet her individual political needs.²⁰ Lower class community workers “measured the value of political ideology by its direct benefit to those living in [their] community and other poor areas,” so their priorities were limited by their population’s shared experiences.²¹ These activists saw a distinction between politics and community work: community work fit the needs of local people within their neighborhood, whereas politics only involved and benefitted those in power. Politics, as they saw it, was untouchable and irrelevant. This belief among low-income people was pervasive and powerful, and it greatly influenced the behavior of poor community workers in comparison to those who had been trained and educated in social work outside of a given community. This difference in perspectives and demeanor strained relations between resident and non-resident workers, a battle that became extremely important in the later years of the CAP.

II. The CAPs’ Downfall: Contested Professionalism and Fears of Radicalization

Local grassroots organizations for the poor reached the height of their government funding during the War on Poverty. Unfortunately, federal support slowly dwindled over time and local agencies began to suffer. Internal struggles over how to run the CAPs quickly emerged. Combined with the fear of placing power into the hands of the poor—a fear that was prevalent at the federal, state, and municipal levels—public support for the CAPs dropped drastically. This hindered the CAPs’ ability to receive further funds, so that community antipoverty organizations’ efforts never matched the success of their activity in the 1960s and 1970s again.

Although many women were pulled into community work through their families, social networks, or other civil society organizations, many more joined the War on Poverty because of their sympathy for the needs of the poor. These females tended to be involved with the paid side of community work, as they had sought careers in social work or community action. Their outlooks on community activism tended to reflect their educational or vocational training. Their academic lives had informed them of the oppressive systems in place, and this influenced

their purpose regarding community work.²² Meanwhile, community residents tended to prefer programs that sanctioned flexibility, such as the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM). The OEO's guidelines "betrayed a professional bias that dismissed poor people's ability to exercise critical leadership," but CDGM still allowed for its early childhood education centers to adapt the suggested OEO structure to their communities as was fitting.²³ Most community workers believed that involvement in these types of accommodating programs best benefitted the communities they intended to serve and provided the most rewarding work experience for the community organizers, as well. However, not everybody in the CAAs and similar organizations agreed with this type of management. Just as class differences generated varying ideas as to how to best conduct business, many of the men involved in these programs also pushed for different goals and tactics. The Washington, D.C., NWRO campaign for furniture in 1970, manifested these difficult dynamics clearly.

At the time, poor women in Washington, D.C., were unable to save anything from their cash assistance, due to how few of their basic living expenses were covered by the funds each month. Therefore, most of them were in need of furniture for their homes. To meet this need, welfare recipients began to organize. When local welfare caseworkers ignored their requests for extra funds, the women placed hundreds of emergency cash requests with the agency to procure money for furniture. Still, the welfare department did not respond. As their legitimate and proper actions had elicited no reactions from welfare caseworkers, the women began to radicalize. They attacked the welfare department's building, breaking windows and creating a ruckus. Although the welfare department still did not respond to these women, George Wiley, the director of the NWRO, did. He called in twelve more staff members for the organization to handle the situation. These new NWRO participants brought the furniture campaign in a new, more peaceful direction, as they insisted open negotiations with the welfare department would be more fruitful. All twelve of the new activists were men.²⁴ The national organization hoped to move away from the radical image these women had created, but ultimately the new staff members' techniques failed as well, as no extra money was obtained for furniture for these mothers. This situation begged the questions: which methods were most effective? Was there a difference

between the types of tactics if the end results were the same? The common belief of the time was that yes, there was a difference, a very large difference, between the two types of tactics. Even if each situation ended the same way, radical methods intimidated most Americans. Throughout the 1960s, community action continued to gain a negative image among the public because of the assumption that it would veer toward militancy.

President Johnson, supposedly the man behind the War on Poverty, was among the politicians who feared the CAPs' outcomes. In fact, he held stronger doubts than most. His presidential tapes, now housed in the University of Virginia's Miller Center, reveal that he did not understand the CAP, to the point of distrust in the CAAs. He also worried that the assumed potential that radical grassroots groups would emerge could hurt his chances of re-election.²⁵ To hinder the possibility of militancy and radicalization, Johnson's budget director clarified what "maximum feasible participation" meant in a memo released shortly after the EOA. According to this note, the phrase simply meant that professionals should still lead the agencies, but that a concerted effort should be made to provide poor people with the rest of the non-professional staff jobs.²⁶ To Johnson's administration, the CAP was not intended to empower poor people, despite the ideology and sociological theories off of which it was based. Instead, they intended for the CAP to provide low-income people with work.

Unfortunately for the lower class, and particularly for the women most involved in community work, the unquestioned, expansive support of the CAP existed for only a few years before the government and public began to pull back their support and funding. Additionally, poverty research had begun a new area of study. The discipline's push for "hard statistics," which were supposed to be objective and scientific, held these programs to new standards when the issue of their funding came up again.²⁷ For example, the Head Start community preschool program, which had begun in 1962 before the War on Poverty, was founded based upon the political conviction that it was a positive, beneficial program for the government to offer. However, by the early 1970s, the nature of poverty research had changed greatly, so that the federal government needed different proof than before to justify continued funding for the preschool agenda. Political whims no longer sufficed. Studies had to show

financial returns on the money put into the program, in order for more money to be devoted to the cause.²⁸ With these tides of change, federal support for community action and the War on Poverty slowly faded throughout the 1970s. By the 1980s, President Reagan eliminated the CAP completely. Existing CAAs either had to close or find new sources of funding. Therefore, the nature and efficacy of neighborhood organizing changed yet again.

III. Low- Income Women's Participation in CAPs—Success or Failure?

Many scholars believe that the CAPs' outcomes represent some of the most successful community activism in response to poverty. Yet in many ways, this poor peoples' movement seemed to fail. According to Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, the lack of enduring activism constitutes the movement's biggest failure. Poor people, especially the organizers involved with the National Welfare Rights Organization, spent too much time coordinating organization efforts, rather than pushing mass mobilization and greater membership numbers.²⁹ Therefore, people were not driven to prolong participation. Furthermore, they were not able to withstand the pressures community activism faced in the late 1960s and 1970s. Because most of the smaller non-federally funded organizations never progressed to national levels, sustaining momentum proved to be even more difficult. For CAAs and their programs, the move away from government backing hurt the energy of these institutions as well, as few members remained motivated enough to seek alternative funding.

Naples' interviews also revealed another way in which these organizations suffered: they left little room for their children to participate. Women, whose children accompanied them, were often seen as forcing their children to join. At the same time, those children who later wanted to participate in community activism as adults often felt as if their parents' groups did not match their own political interests.³⁰ This was partly because their children were affected by the era of globalization, so that they were more knowledgeable of, and sympathetic to, causes in distant locations. Yet these children also often felt excluded from their mothers' activism because these women had spent so many years narrowing down the informal membership criteria for participation in

their neighborhood groups.³¹ Because these mothers did not create a flexible environment in which their children ultimately could join their organizations, it seems as if they somehow failed in the end, no matter how successful their activities may have been at one time.

However, Ernst defends the people involved in this local community activism, particularly the women, as she points out the difficulty in cultivating and maintaining any sort of political movement while the members' lives are in constant crisis.³² Ideally, these women might have fashioned organizations that could withstand internal and external pressures. Yet this simply was not feasible. While their activism altered and improved their mothering, they were also limited by their needs to mother. While their organizing often helped them acquire that which they were lacking, the fact that they were lacking sometimes served as a huge deterrent to success. These women lived a precarious, paradoxical lifestyle—not by their own choosing, but because they were poor. Their very cause for motivation continued to limit them, to the point of supposed failure. Yet during the height of the War on Poverty, poor people—especially activist mothers—made significant gains that they probably would not have made without collaboration and neighborhood action. The memory of these achievements has endured and is evident in poor peoples' initiatives today: until the American welfare system changes drastically, community organizing will continue to serve low-income groups as one of the best tools they can use to meet their needs.

Endnotes

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² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ Mimi Abramovitz. *Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996), 112.

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⁷ Anne M. Valk. "'Mother Power': The Movement for Welfare Rights in Washington, D.C., 1966-1972," *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 4 (2000): 38.

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¹¹ Cynthia Edmonds-Cady. "Mobilizing Motherhood: Race, Class, and the Uses of Maternalism in the Welfare Rights Movement," in *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3/4 (2009): 210.

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¹³ Rose Ernst. "Working Expectations: Frame Diagnosis and the Welfare Rights Movement," in *Social Movement Studies* 8, no. 3 (2009): 194.

¹⁴ Edmonds-Cady. "Getting to the Grassroots," 19.

¹⁵ Gordon, 142-143.

¹⁶ For more information, see Christina Greene, "'Someday...the Colored and the White Will Stand Together': The War on Poverty, Black Power Politics, and South Women's Interracial Alliances," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*. Ed. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 161-163, and 170-172.

¹⁷ See Robert Bauman. "Gender, Civil Rights Activism, and the War on Poverty in Los Angeles," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*. Ed. Annelise

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- ¹⁸ Naples, 104. ³⁰ Naples, 155.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 141. ³¹ *Ibid.*, 164.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 147. ³² Ernst, 195.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 87.
- ²³ Amy Jordan. "Fighting for the Child Development Group of Mississippi: Poor People, Local Politics, and the Complicated Legacy of Head Start," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*. Ed. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 282.
- ²⁴ Valk, 47-49.
- ²⁵ Guian A. McKee. "This Government Is with Us': Lyndon Johnson and the Grassroots War on Poverty," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*. Ed. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 56.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.
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