

## Reach Up Is a Feminist Issue

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Before the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare  
Chair: Senator Virginia "Ginny" Lyons

April 18, 2019

Thank you for having me.

The purpose of my remarks today is to underline the importance of Reach Up and other antipoverty supports – especially those which provide flexible cash benefits – to the wellbeing of Vermont's families. I focus particularly, as I do in my published research, on the wellbeing of women heads of household, including those with disabilities. I take what feminist academics call a "reproductive justice" lens to this issue, arguing that without the economic foundation promised by the Reach Up and Reach Ahead programs, women lack the full range of reproductive options that are necessary to ensure genuine choice.

At this historic moment, with Vermont poised to make significant strides forward in the name of gender justice, I ask you all to take on a serious feminist commitment: a

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commitment to reforming the Reach Up program to ensure that it respects the caregiving work performed by low-income people. This kind of feminism may be different from the ones you usually encounter in this building. But it is equally important and, my coauthor and I would argue, inseparable from the others.

I draw here on research I have done over the past five years with my co-author, Dr. Gwendolyn Mink. Our work, Ensuring Poverty: Welfare Reform in Feminist Perspective, can be seen as a book-length biography of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). This statute is often known by the shorthand phrase, “welfare reform,” which gave us the national program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Reach Up in Vermont.

### **Welfare Reform: What was/is it?**

Welfare reform was the fulcrum of the wide-ranging 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which overhauled safety net programs – and which was written by the then-new Republican Congressional majority in Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton days before he accepted his Party’s nomination for a second time. Among the programs targeted for revision or replacement was the sixty-year-old Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, which was replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Reach Up.

Mink and I understand the endorsement of PRWORA and the TANF program as an original sin of the modern Democratic Party. In this, we join many, oft-forgotten,

Democratic and progressive critics from the time -- including my coauthor's late mother, Representative Patsy Mink of Hawaii. We conclude that, by supporting welfare reform, President Clinton abrogated some of the foundational commitments of his Party. These were commitments dating from the New Deal period of the 1930s to alleviate poverty and to do so largely via cash benefits that allowed poor people to participate in mainstream society. They were also commitments from the 1960s onward to support the civil and economic rights of African Americans, and to endorse women's equality and autonomy. Moreover, our historical analysis encourages us to believe that President Clinton did this deliberately, as a way of demonstrating his bona fides as a "New Democrat" to portions of the electorate he believed were important to his re-election.

While ostensibly still an anti-poverty program, TANF enhanced the economic insecurity of poor Americans, especially low-income mothers and their children, and imposed one-way mandates of responsibility often euphemistically called "contracts" upon recipients – and, in the relationship between states and the national administration, also upon the states. We see this in TANF's work requirements: states *must* require recipients to engage in narrowly defined "work activities" and *must* impose sanctions if the person does not meet the requirements.

Despite rhetoric about promoting economic opportunity, the statute included no guarantee of employment, or a robust promise of assistance to *find* employment.

Access to education and training was cut substantially in TANF, from what it had been in the predecessor program, the Family Support Act, created in the Reagan era. As I am sure you are aware, child care funding was increased but never to the point where it would be available to all TANF or former TANF families that needed it – and never made universal, to serve as an option for *all* families.

In addition to the messages it sends about poor workers' vulnerability, the TANF law also sends a message about the very low value public policy makers place on the care work low-income and nonwhite women do – for their kids especially but also (even more invisibly) for elderly, disabled, and ill family members, to say nothing of their own self-care.

### **Welfare (Reform) as a Feminist Issue**

The issues raised by Reach Up are feminist issues: The statute that created this program at the national level privileged (straight, neotraditional) marriage and controlling teen fertility over reducing family poverty – which is evident from the fact that these two goals are mentioned as purposes of the law and reducing poverty is not. The TANF work requirement aimed to improve recipients by having them perform federally defined “work activities” *and* to drive female recipients into male-dominant marriages. This aspect of the law emerged simultaneous with the Republican assault on the movement for LGBTQ marriage equality.

The feminism of undoing the problematic aspects of welfare reform – the kind I

urge you to adopt – may not be a familiar form of feminism:

While it encompasses the issues of equality raised each year on Equal Pay Day, it goes further to consider the ways in which caregiving responsibilities affect women's work and wages.

It definitely includes issues such as earned family and medical leaves. But it also demands support for those who are the mirror image of the parent imagined as the subject of family leave policy – in other words, a caregiver who is mostly *outside* the paid workforce and needs economic aid in order to fulfill her responsibilities. She may also need educational, child care and other services in order to find and keep a decent paid job (if she wants one).

And while this feminism demands full, unfettered, secure and accessible abortion and other reproductive health care services, it rests on the premise that abortion is not enough to secure real liberty – “choice” – in people's reproductive and parenting lives.

This is where the approach that scholars and activists call “reproductive justice” comes in: A signal text in this field explains: “At the heart of reproductive justice is this claim: all fertile persons and person who reproduce and become parents require a safe and dignified context for these most fundamental human experiences. Achieving this goal depends on access to specific, community-based resources including high-quality health care, housing and education, a living wage, a healthy environment, and a safety net for times when these resources fail. Safe and dignified fertility management,

childbirth and parenting are impossible without these resources.”\*\* Reproductive Justice demands that we remember the ineffable ways in which race, class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, citizenship status and other factors shape reproductive and parenting experiences.

Imagine how it might change our perception if we considered all of our social policies against the standard of Reproductive Justice, believing that justice will only be achieved when all people have what is required to ensure their un-coerced choice *to parent*, as well as what they need to avoid parenting when that is their choice. At the very minimum, we would demand without delay a Reach Up program that brought its recipients up to an adequate income level, with minimal bureaucratic barriers to receiving aid and additional resources for those who are fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities while facing other challenges, including the challenges posed by one’s own and/or one’s child’s disabilities.

I look forward to our discussion.

THANK YOU.

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\*\* Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, Reproductive Justice: An introduction (University of California Press, 2017), 9.