

# Women on Welfare: Expanding Citizenship

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## **Women on Welfare: Expanding Citizenship**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to expand the definition of citizenship to include care work and living social policy of women on welfare created through their community social activism.

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Although focusing on the ravages of war and injustices to democracy abroad is often easier, as adult educators, we must not be blind to our role in unwittingly promoting other abuses of democracy. We do this by slowly accepting discourses of citizenship as endorsed by our governments. More and more the definition of citizen, especially through welfare policy, is associated with economic power one holds through paid work and validated by paying taxes (*BC Benefits: Renewing Our Social Safety Net*, 1995; Cameron, 1996; Orloff, 2001; Riemer, 1997). This excludes, on a deeper level, from citizenship activities of more vulnerable populations, such as immigrants, diverse ethnicities, and women on welfare. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate how women on welfare fight for social justice on their terms in their everyday lives while expanding the definition of citizenship by creating living social policy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

If researchers hope to expand definitions of citizenship, they must start from the everyday as problematic as “a living laboratory” as proposed by Dorothy Smith (1987). Within the everyday, “relations of ruling” constrain women on welfare (p. 3). Pierre Bourdieu (1977) would point out that in dynamic fields of social relationship, individuals’ choices, agency, and access to forms of capital, education, social networks, and status, may constrain individuals through symbolic violence. One way to do this is to stigmatize and attribute less status to women on welfare because of their diminished economic power because they are subsidized by government benefits, not paid work outside the home. Thus, they are not contributing taxpayers and not citizens as defined by government (*Renewing Our Social Safety Net*, 1995).

Feminist scholars seek to expand the definition of citizenship by including care work conducted in private spaces (Tronto, 2001) and illustrating the interdependency of public, paid work and private, caring work through “social cooperation [as] a requisite for citizenship” (Kittay, 2001, p. 42). Through their choices, Fraser (1989) contends women on welfare choose to act as oppositional agents to meet their needs. By looking at actions of women on welfare, Dobson (2001) maintains they judge public policy, alter it, and view themselves as responsible for others in their communities. Thus, women on welfare are “taking stands on issues and active family and community participation, [while] becoming an active creator of culture” and social policies within their communities (Horowitz, 1995, p. 228).

Tronto (2001) argues care work should be fundamental in determining citizenship (p. 72). She justifies her stance by pointing out all individuals are interdependent and engaged in the caring process daily throughout the life course (p. 78). Thus, by virtue of care work, individuals as “citizens make contributions to the state through” this unpaid labour (p. 72). Consequently, “To make an activity a mark of citizenship is to imply that it is public and not just private” (p. 78). This would eliminate the private/public dichotomy from citizenship. Furthermore, Tronto contends if the state supports individuals’ caring activities, then this “restores people as the actors [or citizens] who engage in care” (p. 82).

## **Design and Methodology**

To examine how women's actions within their everyday lives created social policy and redefined citizenship, I used Daniel Bertaux's (1981) life history method to collect women's stories. Bertaux's method links individuals' lived experiences at the daily private level to the public structures in society at the macro or public sphere. Peter Alheit (1994) complements Bertaux's work by adding adult education and adult learning. For Alheit, as creative agents, individuals can decipher "surplus meanings" of biographical knowledge as a learning process in their transitions (1994, p. 290). Through connections to new knowledge, individuals can learn more about themselves, links to social structures, and personal life in the everyday world. Through learning, individuals connect and enact un-lived potentialities while reshaping structures and conditional frameworks encountered in social spaces. To understand single mother's lives, learning, and resulting actions in their everyday lives, I conducted taped, semi-structured conversational interviews with 23 women, aged 26 to 55 from 1998 to 2001. I analyzed interviews and written personal introductions using Atlas.ti to manage the large data set.

### **Findings: Caring Citizenship**

Women engaged in self-directed learning projects through reading, libraries, the Internet, and individuals. Aside from learning about their own needs, skills, and abilities to acquire social, cultural, and symbolic capital, even more importantly, women's learning projects provided knowledge about community resources, welfare rights and entitlements, and lived social policy.

Using knowledge from their self-directed learning projects for care work, these 23 women acted as strategic political agents, not as dependent citizens. Their experiences pushed the gendered definition of citizenship from an out of home paid worker as a tax payer to strategic political agents choosing to improve their lives and those of others. By questioning, challenging, and strategizing around those in power through their self-directed learning, women became political agents to control the "differential distribution of resources" (Brookfield, 1993, p. 239) available. Through learning, women explored un-lived potentialities (Alheit, 1994) to move into social spaces (Bourdieu, 1977) as political actors and creators of culture. This linked their everyday private, habitual patterns of the social to collective relationships in public social relationships (Bertaux, 1981; Bourdieu, 1977; Olesen, 2000). Thus, the choices women made in the everyday spilled over into the public sphere affecting the structures inhibiting women. Strategic choice and action women take within the community imbue them with social citizenship, not dependency.

### **Citizens Creating Social Policy through "Lessons around the Kitchen Table"**

According to Horowitz (1995), it is "possible to change" individuals' "social worlds and to play an active part in creating new ones" (p. 254). Individuals have these options through the choices they make in "working with and toward one's dreams, community, decision-making, taking the perspective of the other, dealing with emotions, and making one's own path in the social world" (pp. 253-254). As creators of culture, citizens participate actively by making choices and taking stands on issues within their communities and families (p. 228). Also, political citizenship includes "collective and participatory engagement of citizens in the determination of the affairs of their community" (Dietz, 1987, p. 14). This encompasses being "speakers of words and doers of deeds' mutually participating in the public realm" (p. 14). Women on welfare practice social citizenship within the everyday realm that overlaps into the public domain. Through sharing of "kitchen-table policy" in buses, over coffee, around the kitchen table, through casual conversations and exchanges of ideas, in welfare line ups, community resource centres, and other locations, women learn from others that policies, like

choices, are not black and white (Dobson, 2001). Through their choices and actions, women can change policy and call for social justice. Sharing these decisions and actions with others to teach them what they have learned in their transitions emerged as “lessons around the kitchen table” (p. 186). These 23 women did, in fact, create policies by acting as social activists to change their communities.

Not only did the women problem-pose and critically reflect on their everyday experiences to make choices, they also shared information on rights and entitlements with other women. They did this by taking responsibility for their own actions while teaching others about policies and laws. Sometimes, the women took action by attempting to rectify social injustices they observed in their communities, especially towards more vulnerable populations. Finally, women promoted social justice by creating places where individuals could educate themselves and learn to take control of their lives to become oppositional agents to oppressive structures they encountered.

***Kate Franschild: socially responsible and accountable.*** Kate Franschild emphasized this by pointing out not only does she have the tools to survive in a class structured world, but she also feels accountable and responsible for the interests of the community collective of individuals.

I believe in being accountable for my life. I feel a civic duty. I have a social obligation because I have even survived. I was brought up Protestant, and if you have tools, you have a gift. It is your responsibility to use it not only for your own interest, but the collective. I believe as a citizen I have certain responsibilities I take seriously, but there isn't any such thing as equality.

***Almond: helping women of culture.*** Almond also took a stand to help East Indian women leaving their husbands and culture by sheltering them and telling them what she had experienced as a woman outside her culture.

I've helped so many women. I had a couple of East Indian women that couldn't handle their lifestyles. One girl decided to get out of her East Indian house. I said go home, tell them what you want, and then come back. She came back. All I could do was give her some money, gave her a place to stay for a night or two. I said you have to go find your own place, go get a job, and get the hell out of wherever you are. I say that to a lot of women. I could be an advocate.

Almond tried to inform the women of their rights and different resources within the community so they could leave their controlling homes.

***Rochelle: teaching others the laws.*** While fighting for her child support, Rochelle learned a lot about federal and provincial divorce and child support laws. Not only did she advocate for herself, but she also helped men and women with their divorces. “I've written up depositions for [guys] who are in the middle of fights over assets and fights over whether they're going to lose their pension. It's not just women it's affecting. It's affecting guys too.” In addition to helping herself, Rochelle felt part of her civic duty was to help others interpret those laws.

***Lilith: protesting social injustices.*** Lilith displayed her concept of citizenship and social justice in a different way. She chose to protest on behalf of mothers with small children, seniors, and others made to line up outside the welfare office in the hot summer sun for several hours waiting for their welfare checks. Lilith wondered why people on welfare should be treated in this way, so she convinced the Ministry of Social Services in Victoria to investigate this and other abuses of

welfare recipients' rights. She said, "I have a natural background in social justice," so much so that advocates had told Lilith: "They'd like to see me go into advocacy and lobbying." *Collette: creating community resources for social justice.* As an immigrant to Canada, Collette pushed the concept of citizenship even further. She believed in educating the immigrant community and individuals on welfare about their rights and entitlements. This care work began when she saw immigrants were not receiving what they needed. Collette decided to gather information to share with others by creating a community resource. "I did it alone. I really thought [about it by] looking [at] the needs [because] I had a good idea what the needs were. So I kept information to help people, so everybody had something there." Collette drew on her own experiences and background to create the center because she knew "everything about immigration, social assistance, [and] the community, so I had a clear idea, so I took what I thought of for the multicultural centre and put it for a centre."

Collette explained that one of her most important conceptions of citizenship was to educate the community. "I said [the center] was going to be an open door. You have to care for people; otherwise it's not going to work." She took this care work even further by using the center to train other women on welfare so they might acquire office skills and learn how to retain a job. Based on her experience from having participated in local job entry programs, Collette was determined other women would have a different experience at the center. "If I'm going to take women, I want to know when they leave they got something from here."

Collette's perception of citizenship encompassed many dimensions. As a political agent, this meant informing people about their rights, government policies, and resources while educating the community and helping women on welfare make changes in their own lives. For Collette,

I have lived as an education and a tool to help [by] opening a road to people. I am giving them power by giving information for them to fight, not to do things for them. They learn how to do their own things. I have to be careful. I don't want to live in the past. The person I am now cannot forget what I went through. I do not want to forget now that I belong, so I am another class of citizen.

### **Citizenship and Social Activism**

According to Dobson (2001), while policymakers and others reform welfare policy in the United States, those not invited to the table, the poor affected by policy, are gathering at "the kitchen table" not only "pondering changing poverty policy," but they are, in fact, "doing so while daily watching the human effects of poverty" (p. 182). Nancy Naples (1992) discovered in her research "activist mothers." They went beyond what Patricia Hill Collins (1994) called "community othermothers" who cared for others beyond their biological networks. Using "conversations and incidental data from low income mothers and others whose work is rooted in low-income communities," Dobson (2001) discovered women discussing, teaching others, making choices, and taking action (p. 177). Their actions depicted "divergent social thinking characterized by judging public choices" as informed by public social policy and individuals' lived everyday experiences (p. 178). One of Dobson's participants informed her of "the lessons at the kitchen table...[as] the place where [her] mother tried to tell her children about the world that they inhabit – the tough world of low-income America" (p. 186). The lessons not only included individual responsibility for survival, but her teaching encompassed "the idea of responsibility for others as well as one's own" (p. 186). Buses, bus stops, welfare lines, community centers, daycare centers, schools, and other locations where women find themselves

also serve as places to discuss choices and policies. Consequently, other women embracing this idea of “Kitchen-table policy assumes choices are not clear cut, not black and white, gray is all that is real” (p. 188), share information, choices, and decision-making. Through their strategic, social, political actions and choices, although bounded, these individuals contest opportunities provided by public policy and reformers. In effect, these women push the definition of citizenship to include “taking stands on issues and active family and community participation, in addition to becoming an active creator of culture” and social policy (Horowitz, 1995, p. 228). These women are political, social agents taking action within their communities as social act-ors.

As illustrated, the women in my study became political agents as they strategized to navigate their everyday as problematic. Through their own self-directed learning projects, for this group of women, citizenship took on the added dimension of political policymakers through care work of others within the communities of their everyday spaces. Consequently, the women themselves exemplified active social citizens attempting to make changes on the private level through “lessons around the kitchen table” (Dobson, 2001, p. 186) that would also affect the public policy they encountered. Instead of dependents, these 23 women push the definition of citizen to include care work as “kitchen table activists” resulting in social act-or activists within their private and public everyday communities.

### **Conclusions: Citizenship Redefined**

To conclude, the concept of citizenship needs to be redefined. First of all, the current model of citizenship tends to place more value on paid workers outside the home as taxpayers and, consequently, economically independent citizens. This type of citizenship is gendered and is based only on one’s ability and willingness to work in the public sphere for wages. This model ignores women’s unpaid, caring work as they free others to enter the labour force, provide services or caring work for others. Thus, a new definition should include the interdependence of citizens. This too should be valued, not just economic independence through paid work outside the home, for women to be considered full citizens (Lister, 1990, p. 446). Finally, even more importantly, we need to reintegrate into the concept of citizenship the notion of “collective and participatory engagement of citizens in the determination of the affairs of their community” (Dietz, 1987, p. 14). Many women on welfare attempt to change their communities through “lessons around the kitchen table” and their actions to change social policy within their everyday lives (Dodson, 2001). Women on welfare do, in fact, make choices or take control of their lives and make their communities better places to live as they participate in their communities (Dietz, 1987) as political, social, and strategic act-ors.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

As adult educators, we might step back and examine self-directed learning projects and caring work in a new light: political acts. By exploring the political actions of our more vulnerable populations, such as women on welfare, we might look at the type of learning that occurs through “lessons around the kitchen table” while women live un-lived potentialities by creating lived social policy. Thus, women’s caring work, choices, actions, lived social policy, and learning may help us as educators take citizenship beyond government’s citizen-taxpayer and include women on welfare in the dialogue to stretch definitions of adult education, learning, and citizenship. As this research suggests, perhaps, we as researchers and adult educators need to examine our definitions and practices of citizenship at home before we head abroad to impose definitions of citizenship and social justice that might not be working in our own communities.

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