

will work For Food



Sharon Hays on **The Real**

an interview by PAT MACENULTY



SHARON HAYS

One of the most damning things an academic can be called is an “ideologue.” A number of Sharon Hays’s colleagues have labeled her that on occasion. A professor of sociology and women’s studies at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, Hays has written at length about the tension between capitalist competition and human relationships. After reading her work, one fellow professor angrily sputtered, “You’re just a trade unionist!”

Hays’s first book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (Yale University Press), examines how working mothers handle the demands for selflessness at home and self-interest in the workplace. Although not a mother herself, Hays says that understanding the family is crucial to understanding American culture. In her latest book, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (Oxford University Press), she looks at mothers at the bottom of the income ladder — more than 90 percent of adult welfare recipients are single mothers.

To research *Flat Broke*, Hays spent three years interviewing welfare recipients and their caseworkers. At first many viewed the federal welfare-reform act of 1996 with optimism. The former welfare system had done little to help single mothers get off welfare, and almost everyone agreed it was in need of overhauling. Proponents of reform claimed the new system would be motivated by such worthy ideals as independence, productivity, and family unity. But, Hays says, before the act was passed into law, those ideals were compromised by politicians, policy-makers, budget-conscious states, and “scholars and pundits who sell books . . . by providing simple, provocative, one-sided

an activist, Hays replies that she took up college teaching as a form of activism. By publicly participating in rallies, she sets an example for her students, whom she encourages to get involved in community organizations.

I met with Hays at an outdoor cafe in downtown Charlottesville. We were surrounded by the trappings of the educated elite: funky coffee shops, pricey restaurants, and a store selling rare and used books. The poor in Charlottesville, Hays said, refer to the University of Virginia as “the plantation.”

As we discussed the problems that welfare mothers face, Hays’s anger was evident. She tried to contain her anger in her book, she said, because she knew that outright rage would cause many readers to tune her out before they could hear her message.

MacEnulty: Could you briefly explain the welfare-reform act of 1996?

Hays: Its full title is the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, and it can be understood as a social experiment in legislating so-called family values and the Protestant work ethic. It demands that single mothers participate in the paid labor force. From the moment a poor mother enters the welfare office, she must be looking for a job, training for a job, or in a job. If she can’t find a paying job, she is assigned to work full time for a state-appointed agency in return for her welfare check, an arrangement known as “workfare placement.”

After five years, all welfare recipients are expected to be self-sufficient. Many states have instituted even greater restrictions. For instance, in both of the states I studied, single mothers are barred from receiving welfare for more than two years in a row, with a five-year lifetime limit.

The act also brought with it an influx of dollars for child-care subsidies, transportation, and training. Welfare caseworkers and welfare mothers welcomed this funding, but it came with many complex rules and sanctions attached. Getting welfare became so complicated that a number of women I met simply

Cost Of Welfare Reform

portraits of complex issues.” Hays wrote her book to serve as a corrective to those simplistic accounts.

The act that was passed required mothers to work, sometimes in return for no more than the welfare benefits themselves. It brought with it a Byzantine set of rules and subsequent sanctions if the rules were not followed. And it placed a time limit on benefits; after that period was up, single mothers were on their own, whether or not they could support themselves and their children. More than two million families were dropped from the welfare rolls between 1996 and 2001. Today, despite a large number of studies tracking the results of reform, we know little about the fate of those families.

Growing up in northern California, Hays was a math whiz, and her mother encouraged her to become an engineer. In her first semester of college, however, an “Intro to Marxism” class pointed her in a different direction. She received her BA in sociology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and her PhD from UC–San Diego. Asked if she considers herself

Generally, a few instances of bad luck in a row will send a poor woman to the welfare office. It could be something as simple as getting a flat tire so she can't get to work.

gave up. They were worn down by all the demands. To make matters worse, some states set up workshops specifically designed to discourage women from applying for welfare.

MacEnulty: If so many people originally welcomed the reforms, why do you think they turned out to be so problematic?

Hays: For one thing, the act ignores the economic, political, and cultural systems that are ultimately responsible for the large numbers of women and children living in poverty today. Second, welfare reform implicitly treats the problems of raising children, low wages, poor working conditions, and gender and race inequality as private concerns. It is as if it were the fault of individual women that they cannot raise themselves out of poverty. By this logic, there's no need to fix our economic system; all we need to do is fix these "bad" women.

MacEnulty: Back in 1990, when I was a single mother, I got Medicaid and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) coupons for a few months. It was relatively easy. Within a year I was back on my feet financially.

Hays: About a third of all welfare recipients are short-term, one-time users, like you were. That top third will do all right, regardless of welfare reform.

The problem with the old system of welfare was that it did not offer a way out of poverty to the two-thirds who needed it: no training, no help with child care or transportation, and insufficient income supplements. So it needed to be overhauled. And for some people, reform has been successful. But for a large group of single mothers and their children, welfare reform will be disastrous over the long run.

Proponents of reform like to point out that 60 percent of former welfare recipients are now working. What they don't mention is that most of them will not be in that same job a year from now, and half of them aren't earning even poverty-level wages. And you also have to consider the 40 percent of former welfare recipients who now have no job, no welfare, no source of income at all.

MacEnulty: You mentioned sanctions against welfare clients. How does that work?

Hays: The sanctions are punishments for breaking the rules. One rule, for example, is that if you quit your job, you must show "good cause." Problems with child care, illness in

the family, or just the fact that you hate your job are not considered good cause. And if you get fired, you have to prove it was through no fault of your own. If you can't prove this, then you're sanctioned, which means that all or part of your benefits are cut. Nationwide, about one-quarter of welfare clients are under sanction for failure to comply with welfare regulations.

Clients can also be sanctioned for failure to make job contacts, or to attend a scheduled meeting with a caseworker, or to go to all the job-training classes, or to arrive at their workfare placement on time. The rules are so complex and numerous that most caseworkers themselves can't keep up with them, and the clients who break the rules often do so inadvertently or because of circumstances they can't control. Half of the women I interviewed who had been sanctioned didn't know why. The worst part is that while these women are under sanction, they do not receive benefits, but their "clock keeps ticking." In other words, they are using up their lifetime eligibility for welfare but not getting a check.

MacEnulty: How do most welfare mothers wind up on welfare in the first place?

Hays: The most common pattern is a domino effect. For instance, your child gets sick, so you can't go to work, so you lose your job, so the phone gets turned off, so prospective employers can't call you, so you can't pay the rent, and you wind up homeless. Generally, a few instances of bad luck in a row will send a poor woman to the welfare office. It could be something as simple as getting a flat tire so she can't get to work. Or she relied on her relatives to provide free child care, and then the relatives left town.

The kinds of transportation nightmares these women go through are inconceivable to most of us. If you're poor, jobs are usually located a long distance from where you live. So you spend three hours on the bus, shuttling the kids to child care and yourself to work. Then it's another three hours back home. This is in addition to your eight-to-ten-hour workday.

I'll never forget how one woman told me she was "holding on good" — until her boss switched her to the night shift. No child-care center would take her kids that late. She lost her job, and, as punishment for losing her job, she was sanctioned and lost the assistance she'd been getting from the welfare office. In short, women wind up at the welfare office because they're poor and they've run out of alternatives.

I think that welfare reform is evidence of the triumph of market logic. We believe that the free market is the solution to all our problems, but the more it takes over, the more trouble we're all in. What you see in the welfare system today is the exaggerated consequences of the triumph of market logic and the decline of our collective sense of obligation to one another.

MacEnulty: But even the mothers you interviewed seem to view self-sufficiency as a worthy goal.

Hays: Yes, on the surface, welfare reform is based on positive principles. Many people who think that welfare reform is a good idea are not mean-spirited. The trouble is that the more idealistic principles behind reform — independence, citizenship, a commitment to the common good — don't match the reality of low-wage work, child care, and transportation issues,

not to mention the plethora of family problems and, in some cases, mental and physical disabilities these women face. Given the economic realities of our times and the lack of support for raising children, it just isn't possible for the majority of these mothers to achieve the ideal.

MacEnulty: Historically, what has been our attitude toward the poor?

Hays: A founding principle of our nation is the idea that, although we might have disdain for the poor, we are still obligated to keep them from starving to death. When welfare reform came along in 1996, it implicitly said, "If poor people can't achieve self-sufficiency, then that's their problem." Period. It's similar to what the federal government is saying to the states right now: "If you can't make it on your own, then you deserve your fate." Numerous states across the nation are facing major fiscal crises. Oregon, for example, can't pay its public defenders and is closing schools early to save money.

MacEnulty: A lot of people wonder why the poor have so many children when they obviously can't afford to take care of them.

Hays: There *is* a correlation between single parenthood and poverty. But saying there's a correlation is not the same thing as saying that single parenting *causes* poverty. There are many, many hidden factors. Blaming parents is the wrong place to start.

Single parenting is a social phenomenon that cuts across class lines. In 1900, the rate of single parenting was 5 percent. In the 1960s, when all the furor and hand-wringing started, the rate was 12 percent. Today more than half of all American children will end up living with a single parent at some point in their childhood.

The rise of single parenting was actually prophesied by a Russian Marxist feminist named Alexandra Kollantai in 1909. She suggested that the "liberation" of American middle-class women to work for pay and to engage in "free love" would ultimately put working-class and poor women in the position of raising their children alone — with little financial support from fathers, the state, or capitalism.

MacEnulty: Are you saying the predicament of welfare mothers is the fault of feminism?

Hays: No, that would be ridiculous. But the fact is that feminism did have certain unintended consequences. In some ways, the freedoms that benefited middle-class women actually made things harder for working-class and poor women. Combine this with the disappearance of the breadwinning wage and the increasing gap between rich and poor, and the result is a class of women who don't have the skills to make a living, and a class of men who cannot earn enough to support a family. Unemployed men aren't considered appropriate marriage partners — although they remain bed partners — and self-sufficient women make men feel less obligated to marry. Women also ask why they should put themselves in the subordinate position of wife. These are, of course, gross generalizations, but they help us understand the issues.

The truth is that if you're a low-income woman with children, then you've got very few options. Most welfare mothers

want to be a part of the working world. They are hoping to find a good job and a good man. But millions of jobs have disappeared since 2001. And recent studies show that the rate of unemployment for poor single mothers is increasing at an even faster pace than the national unemployment rate.

MacEnulty: What is the "anti-abortion bonus" that you mention in *Flat Broke*?

Hays: The welfare-reform act included a prize of \$100 million to be shared among the five states that showed a decrease in the rate of unwed births without a corresponding increase in the rate of abortion. Of course, the welfare-reform act didn't include any proposals for family planning. In fact, it absolutely prohibited the promotion of family planning by any method other than abstinence. In one of the welfare offices I researched, the caseworkers were strictly forbidden even to mention birth control. This is a self-defeating policy. Almost no one thinks promoting abstinence is a solution.

Congress eventually decided to discontinue the anti-abortion bonus, because it found that a state's welfare policies had no effect on its rates of unwed births and abortion.

MacEnulty: In a footnote to your book, you mention that there are no time limits on welfare benefits to children who live with relatives or other adults who are not themselves receiving welfare. What effect do you think this policy might have?

Hays: My guess is that desperate women will give their kids to the grandparents to raise, so that their kids can still get welfare. The law basically encourages poor women to give up their children.

It's also interesting to note that many states have chosen to cook the books by removing such "child-only" welfare cases from the welfare statistics they report to the federal government. That way, the decrease in the welfare rolls appears greater than it really is. So welfare-reform proponents are calling it a "success" if you make a mom give up her kids.

MacEnulty: Yet right-wing politicians talk a lot about the importance of "family values."

Hays: But they restrict the idea of "family" to a narrowly defined morality. They get away with this in part because there seem to be few voices on the Left that express concern about familial obligations. It's important that the family not get lost. In this culture the family is, in fact, the central training ground for learning about obligation to others. And it teaches you to care about others no matter what their status. I mean, good parents don't love the son who plays basketball any more than they love the son who is lousy at sports. The family teaches us how to be committed to others regardless of their achievements. Welfare reform is actually a sign that the nation is less willing to care for everyone equally.

(end of excerpt)