For example, mothers of disabled children are ‘among the most politically active advocates of disability rights and . . . of disability experience’ notes Hilyer (1993, p. 88; also Blackwell-Stratton et al., 1988).

The disability rights, feminist and civil rights movements have created a foundation that could be used to further a collective agenda for an improved society. Disabled and non-disabled feminists may hold the key to bridging the distance between the movements.

NOTE
1. We are using ‘ableism’ defined as prejudice or discrimination against disabled people (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1993). Disabled women have also referred to these attitudes and practices as ‘disablelism’ (Morris, 1993), ‘disabiliphobia’ (Hershey, 1994), and ‘handicapism’ (Begum, 1992).

CHAPTER 26
Motherhood as Class Privilege in America
Rickie Solinger

Most middle-class Americans, including policy makers and politicians, seemed to agree that it was a “tragedy” when a middle-class woman could not have a baby. The president of a pharmaceutical company that manufactured fertility drugs spoke to a large constituency in the late 1980s when he defined “fundamental rights to life” as including “access to infertility therapy.” Yet many people seemed to draw the line at applying these principles to the family-building urges of poor women. Most Americans agreed that motherhood was “a source of self- and community esteem” for middle-class women, “of family life, of continuity, and of loving relationships.” Most agreed “that the desire to raise a family is a fundamental human longing for most adults, and to be denied that experience is a denial of the right to choose.” Yet when women with few resources had the desire to have a child or to build a family, many Americans freely and quickly applied a financial test for motherhood and found such women inappropriate candidates for motherhood. As we have seen, many argued that for the poor, motherhood was a source not of self- and community esteem or loving relationships but of dependency and even depravity.

During the same season that some members of Congress were promoting middle-class family-building activities, federal and state politicians were engaged in plans and fantasies to give governmental authorities greater power than ever before to control how resourceless women made fertility-related decisions, and to control the arsenal of punishments leveled against a poor woman who made the “wrong choice.” In the late 1980s, in Michigan and other states, politicians were working to cancel Medicaid funds that had given poor women the choice of abortion, at roughly the same time that Pat Schroeder introduced the bill mandating insurance coverage for middle-class infertility cures. On the federal level, President Bush approved big cutbacks in the WIC program—covering...
nutrition and health care for infants and their low-income mothers—while Pat Schroeder and some of her colleagues spoke piously to the middle class about the basic human right to create family and the joys of tending one’s children.\(^5\)

But the most dramatic and perhaps the most popular effort to restrict family building among the poor was the introduction of “family caps,” a mechanism for uncoupling the size of poor families and the amount of the welfare check. For about forty years or more by this time, politicians had been claiming that poor women who collected welfare had sex—and so babies—for government money. The first success in passing a law to squelch this alleged form of prostitution was a Georgia bill passed in both houses of the state legislature and signed by the governor in February 1951. The legislation, which the federal Social Security Commission pressed Georgia state lawmakers to repeal before it went into effect, would have denied welfare grants to “more than one illegitimate child of a mother.”\(^6\)

For more than a decade following the Georgia effort, the federal government actively discouraged states from trying to constrain poor women from having babies using this kind of law. In 1960, a prominent government report on illegitimacy and its relation to the welfare program counseled state legislators and others: “An additional child may mean an increased [welfare] payment to meet part of the cost of the child’s care. For the mother, no ‘profit’ is involved. Rather, an additional child adds to her responsibilities and in many instances, means spreading her income a little thinner.”\(^7\)

By 1970, however, signs of change in the government’s attitude were apparent. When Maryland passed a law capping the maximum welfare grant at a figure fixed for a family of six, the state claimed it was providing incentives for family planning. In *Dandridge v. Williams*, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed Maryland’s welfare plan, and the majority opinion spoke disapprovingly about poor women having babies.\(^8\) According to legal scholar Thomas Ross, *Dandridge* constructed a poor mother’s choice to have another child as “a choice to put her entire family in an even worse position.” Ross points out that when the Supreme Court accepted Maryland’s family planning argument, it accepted the charge that for a poor mother, becoming pregnant is an act of “moral weakness.”\(^9\) Ross suggests that to understand how this decision “draws on the theme of the moral weakness of the poor,” we might “imagine the popular response to a similar, hypothetical state action directed against wage-earner families [that deduct dependents for tax liability-reducing purposes].”\(^10\)

National attention was focused on the “family cap” as an effective way to get poor mothers to stop having children when Wayne Bryant, a “wealthy, patrician lawyer,” the highest-ranking African-American legislator in New Jersey—he was the Democratic assembly leader—introduced family cap legislation in the spring of 1991. Bryant’s plan denied increased benefits to mothers on welfare if they gave birth to additional children while they were on public relief. The proposal garnered so much attention in part because Bryant was African-American; many white politicians and others felt that a black insider was finally willing to stand up and speak the truth about his own people.\(^11\) (Bryant apparently found it necessary to defend himself against the charge that he was prejudiced against his own people; when he appeared before the U.S. Senate, he said, “Let me state from the outset, sir, this is not a David Duke.”)

The New Jersey family cap proposal also created sparks because of Bryant’s timing: almost twelve years into the Reagan-Bush era, the majority of middle-class Americans had embraced the truth of the Welfare Queen and was eager for strategies to dethrone her, particularly during the economic recession of...
the early 1990s. Lawrence Mead accurately described just how hot the family cap plan was when he testified before the Senate in 1992: “There has been great interest in this. In fact, I spent much of the last two months on the phone talking to reporters about these proposals. I even got a call from Glamour magazine. When Glamour wants to write about welfare, then you know it’s on the front burner.”

Throughout late 1991 and early 1992, states applied to the Bush administration for permission to bypass federal welfare guidelines and institute family cap regulations based on the New Jersey model. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton, making a political calculation, spoke out in favor of the New Jersey plan in May 1992 after having opposed the plan previously. Meanwhile, in New Jersey, the combination of the family cap and state funding of abortions for poor women apparently steered, and may have coerced, poor women to have abortions instead of children. When the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed New Jersey’s family cap regulations in C.K. v. Shalala, the majority claimed that this legislation could have “an ameliorative effect” on poor women by curtailing “family instability” and other social ills resulting from poor women having children. Legal scholar Linda C. McClain argues that this court decision “seems to carry the further message that an important and legitimate way to end poverty is to end procreation by poor people.”

Longtime New York senator and family poverty specialist Daniel Patrick Moynihan acknowledged how far Americans had come since the human rights era of the 1960s in accepting the proposition that public policy should constrain the reproductive choices of poor women when he said in 1992, “Twenty-five years ago [the New Jersey family cap regulation] would have caused howls.”

But by the early 1990s, the years of anti-poor, anti-welfare rhetoric beamed across the country had had what Cynthia Newbille of the National Black Women’s Health Project called “a devastating effect on the public’s perception of [poor] women.”

In these years, conservative writers and policy makers frequently invoked frightening images of poor mothers and sometimes used these images to justify transferring their babies to middle-class couples or curtailing public support for these mothers altogether. Conservative analyst Heather MacDonald characterized a poor mother in 1994 as one “who has been beating her children, or failing to feed and bathe them.” MacDonald discouraged funding for rehabilitative services because she doubted that such a woman could be rehabilitated. Instead, she championed child removal as the best solution for saving the children of poor mothers. Marge Roukema, U.S. representative from New Jersey, also championed removal because, she said, “ultimately . . . Americans and the Congress will not countenance children being raised in abusive drug-infested households or going hungry in the street.”

Neither woman provided statistics or citations to bolster their characterizations.

Not surprisingly, Charles Murray and many Republican politicians who looked to Murray for policy guidance drew on these scary images of poor mothers—and on the uneasiness of many Americans responding to the news that their tax dollars were being thrown at these women—to trumpet a dramatic policy initiative based on the premise that poor women should not be mothers. Newt Gingrich and the conservative firebrands in Congress began to tout a plan to send children of poor mothers to orphanages. This plan, they confidently claimed, would solve the illegitimacy problem and the welfare problem, and would finally convince poor women that the government was serious: no more help for their kind.

Tony Blankley, Gingrich’s press secretary, explained why he thought this initiative captured so much attention. “Orphanage,” he said, “is a term that communicates very well.” Numerous
polls at the time showed that most Americans did not support the orphanage initiative, but Republicans continued promoting the idea.\textsuperscript{24} One close observer commented, “Raising the specter of orphanages was viewed as a means to persuade unmarried mothers and welfare-dependent women into controlling their reproduction.”\textsuperscript{25} In an essay with a title that captured perhaps the most important domestic policy debate in the 1990s, “Do Poor Women Have a Right to Bear Children?,” sociologists Christopher Jencks and Kathryn Edin characterized the Contract With America crowd as “welfare bashers [who] would like to prevent the poor from having children.”\textsuperscript{26}

Some critics pointed out that “welfare bashers” wanted to institutionalize the children of poor mothers simply because of “the absence of jobs for mothers willing to work” or the absence of jobs that paid a living wage.\textsuperscript{27} Legal scholar Dorothy Roberts emphasized that policy makers were identifying a group of women—iconically Black—who were “less entitled to be parents.” In various venues, Roberts asked Americans to consider the proposition that “denying someone the right to bear children deprives her of a basic part of her humanity.”\textsuperscript{28} Katha Pollitt, columnist for the Nation, argued that the “Murray-Gingrich orphanage proposal” did not simply threaten poor mothers. Rather, the proposal was an example of “symbolic politics” that aimed to teach Americans “to think of children who have living parents as ‘orphans’ just because those parents are young, female, unmarried and poor.” Pollitt went on, “We are . . . being taught to see those mothers as having no rights and nothing to contribute—as being, in effect, dead.”\textsuperscript{29}

Someone sympathetic to the plight of poor mothers invited Clarissa Pinkola Estes, author of the enormously popular book Women Who Run With the Wolves, to speak at a congressional hearing on the Contract With America in 1995, when conservatives were promoting orphanages and other means of punishing poor mothers. Pinkola Estes, whose speech caused intense, partisan applause in the hearing chambers, echoed Marcella Mason’s sentiments. She said, in part, “[T]he money that it takes to fund [orphanages and maternity homes] would more properly go directly to the recipients . . . As a woman myself who when I was eighteen years old had my first child—as a teenager—I think that most of us, even though we had made a mistake, does not mean that we are stupid.” Fundamentally, Pinkola Estes argued that being young and being poor did not disqualify her or other women from motherhood.\textsuperscript{30}

Politicians were largely uninterested in, or disagreed with, this argument as they pushed on toward “welfare reform” in the mid-1990s. In fact, the welfare reform bill that won bipartisan support in 1996, commonly called the Personal Responsibility Act (PRA), encoded a deeply negative assessment of poor mothers into law. Over and over in the introductory material appended to the PRA are “findings” that strongly suggest only women with proper and adequate resources can or should be mothers. The “findings” also indicate that poor mothers are illegitimate mothers, produce poor-quality children, and must be stopped from reproducing.

In the wake of the PRA, other government and community agencies have followed Congress’s lead, adopting programs and slogans designed to convey (and enforce) this message: “Don’t become a parent until you are truly ready to support a child.”\textsuperscript{31} In November 1999, the Baltimore Sun reported that some anti-teen pregnancy groups had adopted the slogan, “A baby costs $474 a month. How much is your allowance?”\textsuperscript{32} These financial test/reality-testing messages mask a profoundly important set of issues about who can or can’t “afford” to be a mother in the United States. The fact is, using the affordability test reveals that millions of girls and women cannot afford to become
mothers because of circumstances beyond their own control. Jencks and Edin point out that “in 1989, a single working mother with two children needed about $15,000 worth of goods and services to make ends meet. Less than half the 25- to 34-year-old women [the demographic group with the fastest-growing number of single mothers] who worked in 1989 earned that much.” Using 1997 data, a study called “Equal Pay for Working Families” found that if women got equal pay, the annual family incomes of single working mothers would increase $4,459 on average—reducing poverty rates for this group by half, from 25.3 percent to 12.6 percent. (Also important here is the fact that almost half of the children on welfare were born to women who were married at the time they gave birth.)

The most important point Jencks and Edin make is that economic policy in the United States creates and depends on sustaining a pool of low-wage workers, including women who make salaries too low to enable them to “afford” motherhood. The sociologists put it this way: “As long as America remains committed to competitive labor markets, open borders, and weak labor unions, most marginally employable adults will need some kind of public assistance if they have children.” In other words, using a financial test for motherhood would exclude millions of women in the United States from having children because their employers pay white women 73.2 percent and minority women 63.7 percent of what white men earn.

These data seem never to make an impression on politicians. Nor have politicians and policy makers been moved by the data, available both before and after “welfare reform” was enacted, that many poor mothers have been stymied in their efforts to earn enough to “afford” their children because of the absence of day care opportunities. In 1994, Illinois had 34,000 families on a waiting list for day care, California families had a two-to-three-year wait, and thirty-three other states reported substantial waiting periods as well. In 1999, a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that 82 percent of New York families eligible for government-subsidized child care were not receiving it, and that nationally the figure was even higher.

In a brilliant study of poor mothers—their work and survival strategies—Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein emphasize the point that the financial test for motherhood would exclude millions of women through no fault of their own. Edin and Lein find that what poor mothers lack is “a living wage,” not values or worthiness. They reject the personal attacks on poor mothers as dependents and bad choice makers and say, instead, that poor mothers’ problem is a “labor-market problem.” Poor mothers in their study “had made repeated efforts to attain self-sufficiency through work but the kinds of jobs they could get paid too little, offered little security in the short term and provided few opportunities over time. Meanwhile,” they found, “mothers who chose to work were even worse off in material terms than their welfare counterparts.” Judging by the level of support for “welfare reform” rhetoric, most Americans would look at the bank balances of both the mothers on welfare and the ones at low-paying, dead end jobs and determine that neither group had the right to be mothers because they couldn’t support children adequately on their own steam. By inference, it seems, most Americans embrace a proposition that is profoundly problematic in a democratic society, that motherhood should be a class privilege. Motherhood is appropriate, it seems, only for women with enough money to meet the financial test.

NOTES
2. Carol Sanger, “M is for the Many Things,” 63.
6. Bell, Aid to Dependent Children, 70.
17. McClain, “Irresponsible Reproduction,” 403. Welfare policy analyst Richard Nathan observed in 1992 that “New Jersey politicians have been kicked for a tax increase. They want something to kick back. In this case it is welfare babies. For a largely symbolic move, it is just not worth it. It sends the wrong message to people who have been down long enough—in some cases, all their lives.” “Changes in State Welfare Reform Programs,” Hearings, 94.
22. U.S. Representative Christopher Shay of Connecticut explained how the legislation ending AFDC would create block grants which “may be used to establish orphanages.” Sheila Jackson Lee, a representative from Texas, pointed out how silly the orphanage plan was: “Under this welfare reform plan, of the 541,000 children who are currently receiving AFDC in Texas, 288,000 would be denied benefits and only 310 federal orphanage slots would be funded.” “Contract With America—Welfare Reform,” Hearings, 735, 642.


35. Jencks and Edin, “Do Poor Women Have a Right to Bear Children?” 47.


