The Phenomenal Women of Mothers for Justice

Mothers for Justice†
Giovanna Shay††

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise. 

One person I've always, always been in love with is Maya Angelou. I like her. I've always for some reason enjoyed her, because she's always spoken her mind. —Karen

Another person that I'm very inspired by is Maya Angelou. Because her writings are very powerful . . . and it just shows how a black woman, like any other woman, can succeed if she really tries. —Nora

† Mothers for Justice is an activist and empowerment group located in New Haven, Connecticut. Mothers for Justice members are mostly low-income women, many of whom have received or currently are receiving public assistance.

†† J.D. expected, 1997, Yale Law School.

Many people collaborated on this project. Paula Gaber sparked the initial creative concept and later worked with me on the prologue and epilogue. Kathleen A. Sullivan, my faculty advisor, provided invaluable insight, guidance and criticism. Julia Greenfield and Ann Collins contributed helpful editing suggestions. Cheri Quickmire and Gracie Brown, Co-Coordinators of Mothers for Justice, contributed to both the design and the substance of the piece, and inspired me with their vision and drive as organizers. I thank them for welcoming me into their work. Finally, and most importantly, the women of Mothers for Justice, as featured interviewees, co-authors and editors, were amazing sources of information and inspiration. I thank them for sharing their lives with me. This story belongs to them.


Copyright © 1996 by Mothers for Justice. For permission to reprint, please contact Mothers for Justice, c/o Christian Community Action, 168 Davenport Avenue, New Haven, Connecticut 06519, (203) 777-7848.
I. PROLOGUE

It's all in the mind. The mind is the most significant, the strongest thing out there. It's mightier than the pen, because it makes the pen write. That's what it's all about. —Jennifer

In January, 1996, I began working with Mothers for Justice (MFJ), an organization of low-income women based at Christian Community Action (CCA) in New Haven, Connecticut. My intention was to do a narrative project documenting women's stories during a period of significant welfare cuts in Connecticut. The previous year, in January, 1995, the Connecticut General Assembly (General Assembly) had authorized the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services to apply for a waiver from federal law to implement strict new regulations in the state's Aid to Families with Dependant Children (AFDC) program. The new measures, most of which became effective January 1, 1996, included a 21-month durational limit on AFDC benefits; a "family cap" limiting the increase in a family's benefits for an infant born after ten months of participation in the AFDC program to an amount equal to 50% of the usual benefits increase awarded upon birth of a child; a reduction in AFDC benefit payments from 78% to 73% of the standard of need; a reduction of AFDC benefits for those families living in public housing by 8% of the standard of need (the putative "value" of the public housing); and adoption of a "biometric identifier system" (fingerprinting) for AFDC and General Assistance (GA) recipients.

Although the General Assembly made concessions intended to assist women in making the transition from welfare to the paid labor force, perhaps most notably an earned income disregard for earnings up to the federal poverty level

---


6. CONN. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 17b-104(c) (West Supp. 1996).
7. CONN. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 17b-104(d) (West Supp. 1996).
for families subject to time-limited benefits, these measures were undercut by Connecticut's depressed job market. Connecticut suffered a severe recession in the late 1980s and early 1990s when cuts in military spending at the national level produced massive layoffs in the state's manufacturing sector. Although the Connecticut economy began recovering slowly in the mid 1990s, incremental job growth has not compensated for the loss of 158,000 jobs during the recession.

While working with Mothers for Justice, I learned that many women on welfare believed that their transition to the paid labor force is further hindered by a lack of supportive services. A successful and lasting transition to work, they argued, requires reliable public transportation, safe child care, and adequate health insurance, as well as education and job training.

The rhetoric of the welfare cut debate in Connecticut relied on a popular image of the "welfare mother" as a teenage girl with multiple illegitimate children and little motivation to work. This stereotype has been developing in the United States for over thirty years. In a 1994 television campaign ad, Connecticut's Republican Governor, then candidate, John Rowland pitched welfare "reform" by asserting, "right now, we have 12-year-olds that are having children... We have to do something about the welfare system." Coverage of the welfare cuts in the Hartford Courant reinforced these stereotypes, presenting as typical an eighteen-year-old single mother who was not looking for work and admitted, "Basically, I watch T.V." In the early 1990s, the emergence of a "new consensus" that "welfare

---

10. See, e.g., W. Joseph Campbell, March Job Losses Overtake Earlier Gains: Drop of 8100 Steepest in Years, HARTFORD COURANT, May 1, 1993, at C1; Michael Remez, Unemployment Insurance Systems Feel the Pressure of Recession, HARTFORD COURANT, Sep. 28, 1992, at 3.
dependency" was a real and troubling phenomena led then-candidate Clinton to pledge to “end welfare as we know it.” Although Clinton initially used this phrase in advocating an earned income tax credit to reward able-bodied welfare recipients for performing wage work, the result of the “new consensus” was punitive welfare “reform,” first in states such as Connecticut through the federal waiver process, and later at the national level through the imposition of block grants. In the face of these negative images and devastating cuts, I wanted to provide a vehicle for poor women to speak out and tell the truth about their lives.

As a secondary goal, I hoped to engage in participatory action research to learn how advocates could work more effectively with grass-roots organizations to empower low-income people. “Participatory action research” is a method of deriving theory from practice that developed out of Paolo Freire’s Third World education movement and Myles Horton’s literacy work at the Highlander Center in Appalachia. Patricia Maguire explains that participatory research is a method of social investigation of problems, involving participation of oppressed and ordinary people in problem posing and solving. It is an educational process for the researcher and participants, who analyze the structural causes of named problems through collective discussion and interaction. Finally, it is a way for researchers and oppressed

Id.

For a critique of the “new consensus,” see Martha Minow, The Welfare of Single Mothers and Their Children, 26 CONN. L. REV. 817, 822 (“I listen skeptically to the claim of consensus about the work requirements. . . . And who, exactly, is economically self-sufficient—given, for example, the role of bank loans in the financing of education, housing, and businesses?”).


20. 42 U.S.C. § 1315 (1994) (authorizing Secretary of Health and Human Services to grant waivers of federal law to states to conduct demonstration projects).


Mothers for Justice

people to join in solidarity to take collective action, both short and long term, for radical social change. 23

Although I was not doing legal work for the group, my project design was informed by the model of "rebellious lawyering" described by Gerald Lopez and other critical legal scholars as a method of working to empower subordinated groups. 24 I hoped to discern from my experiences with Mothers for Justice principles that could be used both in organizing and lawyering. Lucie White has described this process as "the ongoing practice of reflection among the communities of poor people and their allies that are constituted by the work they come together to do." 25 According to White, "[t]his kind of theoretical practice is enacted in those elusive moments of insight that mark good conversations, or in those tactical innovations that work. This kind of theoretical practice could be 'written up', finally, only in a situated, reflective history of the practice itself." 26

I recognized a number of challenges in embarking on this project with Mothers for Justice. First, I wanted to avoid perpetuating power hierarchies and appropriating the women's stories for my own purposes as a writer. As Daphne Patai pointed out in her compilation of Brazilian women's life stories, "[f]eminist scholars who profess commitments other than to the 'pursuit of knowledge' and immediate professional advancement must seriously consider the problem of reproducing, through our research procedures and limited sense of obligation, the structures of inequality that make other women serve as the subjects of our books. Whenever someone is used as a means to another's ends, the dominant social paradigm is affirmed rather than challenged." 27

Since I am training to be an advocate for low-income people, my goal was not to produce a study of the group, but rather to learn how to participate in its struggle. I did not plan to analyze the women's words, or even to understand my "subjects" completely. Rather, I wanted to act as an advocate in facilitating the process by which my collaborators found their own voices

23. MAGUIRE, supra note 22, at 29.
27. DAPHNE PATAI, BRAZILIAN WOMEN SPEAK: CONTEMPORARY LIFE STORIES 7 (1988).
and spoke out about the issues affecting their lives. This account, therefore, is in no way intended to be an objective ethnography of Mothers for Justice. Rather, it is an unapologetic vehicle for the group members’ expression.

To reduce the exploitative potential of the project, I involved myself generally in Mothers for Justice projects as an intern. I also introduced the idea of a narrative piece to the group and asked the women to participate in designing the project’s form and designating its purpose. The results of this process were mixed. Although initial enthusiasm resulted in the formation of an Oral History Subcommittee, time and resource constraints in the women’s lives ultimately meant that this committee was unable to continue meeting as a group to make decisions through consensus. Rather than distract MFJ members’ attention and limited resources from the group’s core activities, I decided to make the initial decisions regarding the format myself.

After editing and arranging the featured women’s comments and drafting a narrative storyline to tie them together, however, I sent each woman who was quoted a copy of the piece, along with a transcript of our interview. In this way, the women could see which of their comments I had decided to leave out, as well as which I had chosen to include. Through this process, I hoped to avoid mischaracterizing or misquoting the interviewees, and I also hoped to incorporate the women’s feedback, criticism, and editing suggestions in the final product. I was seeking to achieve the dialogue described by Mary Belenky, who said of her collaborative writing projects, “a word that seems better than collaboration is dialogue because it suggests that our so-called research subjects were real participants in the project.”

The results of this process, again, varied greatly. Mothers for Justice members’ comments ranged across a continuum of possible responses. Some women were too busy and over-burdened with school, work, child care, and household chores to make specific criticisms. Others carried the draft with them to read in quiet moments and later met with me for several hours to discuss their suggested changes.

One woman I interviewed later opted not to participate in the project. Some women asked me to delete statements that they had reconsidered. Others pointed out that I had edited their quotes in ways that they thought were misleading. Since my goal was to communicate the message the women wanted to convey, rather than to preserve every word in the text of the transcript, I deferred to the women’s judgments in making these changes.

Another important step in preserving the women’s control over their own words was ensuring that group members had input in identifying the publications to which we submitted the finished product. A crucial decision factor in deciding to publish with the Yale Journal of Law and Feminism was

---

that the journal membership agreed to assign the copyright to Mothers for Justice so that the group could reprint the article in other publications and sell copies of it as a fundraiser.

My goal of preserving the women's control over their words was also paramount in choosing a presentation format. In the first draft of the Article, I had presented interviewees' block quotes without the questions that had elicited their comments. During the editing process, Gracie Brown and Cheri Quickmire, the organizers of Mothers for Justice, asked that I include my questions, where relevant, to provide better context for the women's words. When I reviewed the tapes and transcripts to add my questions, I reassessed the way that I had edited and grouped some of the women's quotes, and made some changes. I also realized that including my questions made my own voice and perspective more visible.

Recognizing my own perspective was an essential step to confronting my second major obstacle: the substantial distance separating me from the women of Mothers for Justice. Patricia Williams advises that "[b]ridging such gaps requires listening at a very deep level, to the uncensored voices of others."29 While most Mothers for Justice members have lived at least part of their lives in poverty, I have known only a secure upper middle-class existence. Like many of the members of Mothers for Justice, I am a student. But while MFJ members struggle for funds to attend Gateway Community and Technical College,30 my studies at the Yale Law School are supported by many sources of assistance, including federally subsidized loans, university-sponsored stipends, and the financial support of my spouse and parents. Also like some of the members of MFJ, I am married. Unlike most of the women, however, I am not yet a parent. While the majority of MFJ members are African-American and long-time residents of New Haven, I am white and, although born in New Haven, have lived most of my life in northern California.

Due to the many differences between my life experience and the lives of most of the featured women, I realized that I would have to choose a narrative form carefully. I felt that I could not write a fictionalized composite account31 of group members' stories convincingly, since I did not have the necessary life experience. Nor did I want to paraphrase or analyze the women's words too much, because the power of their accounts was best conveyed by their own forms of expression. Moreover, I did not want to further distance myself from or objectify the women in the group by treating their experiences as the subject of an academic treatise.

29. WILLIAMS, supra note 2, at 150.
30. Although Pell Grants pay many M4J members' tuition at Gateway Community and Technical College, New Haven's local junior college, members must still search for necessary funding for transportation and childcare.
31. One such composite narrative, which I showed the group as a possible model for our project, was Lisa Kelly, If Anybody Asks You Who I Am: An Outsider's Story of the Duty to Establish Paternity, 6 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 297 (1994).
So I decided to present the women's stories largely in their own words. I conducted open-ended interviews, most of which were prefaced by off-the-record discussions in which I explained my hopes for the project and attempted to identify major themes the interviewees wanted to convey to future readers. I then usually began with the question, "How did you become involved in Mothers for Justice?" From there, each interview varied. Some interviews were hurried exchanges in the backseat of a car on the way home from legislative hearings at the Connecticut State General Assembly. Others were leisurely discussions in women's kitchens. With women who gave briefer answers and suggested fewer topics of discussion, I asked more questions. Many women, however, took control of the interview. Listening to the answers to each question, I was able to follow-up on themes suggested by the interviewee. In this way, the conversation followed a unique trail blazed by each woman.

After every interview, I transcribed the tape of our conversation as completely as possible. I chose to transcribe the tapes myself because I felt that this helped me to better capture each woman's voice. Susan Tucker explains that she chose a similar method because she felt she had "a much better chance of capturing the spoken voice in written words and of ultimately repeating those stories that seemed most important to the speakers or most representative of the collective past."33

In the initial transcription I attempted to preserve all original phrasing and grammar to protect each woman's individual voice. In the final version, I made minor modifications to supply missing words and eliminate incomplete thoughts. Most of these modifications are designated by ellipses. I also changed the names and identifying characteristics of most of the women featured in the piece, although a few preferred to use their own names.

---


33. See Susan Tucker, Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South 7 (1988).
Mothers for Justice

In organizing the material, I grouped women's comments thematically to present a kaleidoscope of perspectives on different episodes in the Mothers for Justice history. In this way, I hoped to construct what Carole Boyce Davies describes as a "collective life story," or "one story refracted through multiple lives, lives that share a common experience." Boyce Davies writes,

in this particular form of life story telling, the editor is often positioned in an activist, working relationship with a variety of women. Out of this experience of struggle and shared political purpose come these stories. The women whose stories are told seem to share a commitment to making their stories public. In all of these collections, the editors describe an ongoing process of struggle over issues that led to the need to document their collective experiences.

By alternating descriptions of the challenges facing Mothers for Justice with accounts of corresponding protest strategies, I hoped to portray the group's responsiveness to grassroots concerns. I also wanted to capture the spirit of Mothers for Justice's unceasing efforts, through varied strategies, to break the hegemonic control of mainstream media and political rhetoric.

A collage of materials documents this episode in the Mothers for Justice history: proposed legislation, newspaper and magazine articles, my journal entries, and, most importantly, excerpts from the open-ended interviews with Mothers for Justice members and organizers. Postmodern theory suggests there is no one objective truth, but rather multiple perspectives dependent upon the speaker's context, identity, and experience. Inequality of power privileges some speakers' views of realities and obscures others. As Catharine MacKinnon points out, "power constructs the appearance of reality by silencing the voices of the powerless, by excluding them from access to authoritative discourse."

By assembling a variety of voices, I hope to convey that the story of the welfare cuts in Connecticut can only be understood as a clash between different, conflicting realities. The members of Mothers for Justice share realities that are often complementary and overlapping. But legislators, journalists, and legal advocates occupy a separate universe that all too often eclipses the world of the poor. I hope that juxtaposing dissonant voices within a narrative storyline will give Mothers for Justice members access to a new public forum, without forcing the group to speak with one voice.

---

35. *Id.* at 5.
Of course, the most intractable obstacle to facilitating Mothers for Justice members’ expression was my inability to remove my own perspective from the editing process. “No perspective asserted to produce ‘the truth’ is objective,” cautions Martha Minow, “but rather will obscure the power of the person attributing a difference while excluding important competing perspectives.” Even as I sought guidance from the group, transcribed interviews, and attempted to promote dialogue in editing, I still filtered the group’s activities through the lens of my own experience and was drawn to certain interviewees’ words for unknowable reasons. As Jennifer, one of the project participants, said to me during the editing process, “they’re my words, but it’s your organization.”

Yet I could not erase myself from the piece without removing myself from the project. And removing myself from the project would have meant depriving the group of an ally who possessed the extra time and resources necessary to bring the group members’ words to a larger audience at a critical moment in the welfare crisis. So, I decided that the message should survive the methodology. I hope that the women of Mothers for Justice, to whom I am ultimately accountable, will forgive me the narrative’s blindspots.

The product of my semester-long experience is the following account of Mothers for Justice members’ attempts to resist punitive welfare measures introduced in the 1996 legislative session of the Connecticut General Assembly. It chronicles members’ ongoing struggle to define themselves in the face of media stereotyping and public stigmatization. I hope the account is true to the voices of Mothers for Justice, and that it captures even a little of the heroic spirit of these phenomenal women.

—Giovanna Shay

II. GAINING A VOICE

I feel like I'm in a shell trying to get out. I feel like I'm trapped. I'm trying to find a strategy . . . to get out of this so that I can feel like a normal citizen. I don't feel like a normal citizen. That's the way I'm feeling right now. That's the way this welfare reform makes me feel. I feel like I'm being labelled. That's the way it is with me right now.
—Nora

We're giving voice to people who otherwise wouldn't be heard.
—Gracie

A. Getting Involved in Mothers for Justice

NEW HAVEN REGISTER, MONDAY, JANUARY 9, 1995: In the past two years, Mothers for Justice has devoted itself to being a positive influence in the city's neediest communities. Members have worked at soup kitchens and staged a protest on the New Haven Green over food prices at local stores—in addition to offering testimony before state legislative panels. . . . The group, which consists of more than 20 welfare mothers in New Haven, as well as a few of their daughters, is sponsored by Christian Community Action, a social agency in the city. They meet monthly to discuss local and national issues that affect their lives.

Mothers for Justice is based at the Welfare Justice Project at Christian Community Action in New Haven, Connecticut. Although CCA is located in what is known as the Hill neighborhood, MFJ brings together women

---

40. Id.
41. Christian Community Action (CCA) is, according to its Mission Statement, "an ecumenical social service organization that expresses faithful witness through providing emergency food, housing and support to those who are poor in New Haven, encouraging their efforts to attain self-sufficiency and working to change systems that perpetuate poverty and injustice." CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY ACTION, MISSION STATEMENT (1996). CCA was founded through dialogue among Christian religious groups in 1966, and began social action in 1967, in the wake of a fire at a New Haven tenement. In response to the riots of the summer of 1967, CCA became a center for emergency housing and crisis intervention. In 1971, CCA moved to its current location at 168 Davenport Avenue. Today CCA runs an emergency shelter and food pantry and administers various programs including Connecticut's Energy Assistance program and the Aid to Education program. Id.
42. "The Hill" is a low-income, predominantly minority neighborhood in the southwest part of New Haven. According to the 1990 US Census, the Hill has one of the largest populations of children who speak English "not well." REGIONAL DATA COOPERATIVE FOR NEW HAVEN, NEW HAVEN MAPS '95, 9 (1995). Likewise, some sections of the Hill have an unemployment rate for males over sixteen as high as 35-70%. Id. at 10. Also according to the 1990 Census, the Hill is one of the neighborhoods in New Haven that has the largest number of female-headed households with children living below the poverty level. Id. at 11.
from all over the greater New Haven area. Its members form a network of women who share information about welfare cuts and regulations and advocate beneficial changes in social policy at the state, federal, and local levels. MFJ members also support each another in their attempts to become self-sufficient through education and career development.

MFJ is coordinated by Gracie Brown and Cheri Quickmire, who share one full-time position as Co-Directors of CCA’s Welfare Justice Project. Gracie is African-American, a past president of MFJ, a recent graduate of Gateway Community and Technical College, and the mother of three children. In the past year she has made a successful transition from “welfare mom” to “working mom,” and she is a role model for many women in the group. Cheri is white, a former advocate for victims of domestic violence, and an admirer of the philosophy of Paolo Freire. She has two young sons. MFJ also has a President elected by the membership, Kecia. Kecia is a nursing student at Gateway Community and Technical College in New Haven. She is married with three children. Her husband is currently disabled.

Interning with MFJ, I met MFJ members at the bi-monthly MFJ meetings and special events. Karen, Vice-President of MFJ, is an engaging woman active in her church. Barbara, a dietetics student and frugal gourmet, and Marjory, an aspiring teacher and new Grandma, go everywhere together. Lorraine, once a drag-racer at Daytona, recently moved out of the CCA shelter. Sharon, who grew up in rural Florida, volunteers in the CCA office to improve her job skills. Nora is devoted to her only daughter. Sarah met Cheri recently while testifying at the State General Assembly against the elimination of the state Rental Assistance Program (RAP). Jennifer is a witty and fun-loving woman who is concerned about her talented son’s safe passage through adolescence. Iva used her MFJ experience to develop independent community programs and is respected for her mental toughness. Elizabeth is new to the group and is currently involved in a local African-American history club.

Mothers for Justice pursues a wide-range of advocacy methods. Its organizers coordinate car-loads of poor people who present legislative testimony against punitive welfare cuts in the State Capitol in Hartford, Connecticut. MFJ members have participated in direct actions on the New Haven Green, a public area in the center of town, protesting inflated urban grocery prices, and at the City Welfare Office, opposing the fingerprinting of General Assistance recipients. MFJ members also speak to TV and print reporters, voicing their opposition to measures that threaten poor communities.

43. Women involved in Mothers for Justice live in various New Haven neighborhoods, including the Dwight Corridor, Dixwell and Fair Haven areas. Some also live in smaller surrounding towns and suburbs.
45. See EDIE N. GOLDENBERG, MAKING THE PAPERS: THE ACCESS OF RESOURCE-POOR GROUPS TO
Mothers for Justice

GS to Cheri: What do you think was the idea that started Mothers for Justice? Do you know what the initial spark was?

Cheri: There were a couple of different times in [CCA] history when groups of recipients got together. . . . At least on one occasion it was around the legislative session and feeling the need to get the people who would actually be suffering at the hand of the legislators and the decisions that would be made to get people out to testify at the legislature. That was one of the opportunities. And then the other was to get people together to talk about some of the things that were coming through, the welfare reform that was being discussed at the Capitol. . . . We've done a lot of recruitment through the Gateway Community College through the Job Connection program where women were going to school full-time for the most part. They got to know each other sometimes through the woman who was the coordinator for Job Connection . . . and through just finding each other. Also sometimes through their churches. Kecia's done some recruiting through her church. . . . Prior to my coming on, a lot of the members were recruited through the Homeless Shelter, through CCA's shelter. . . . The woman who was in my position before invited women in the house to participate, and that is how they got started. They also did some leafleting of . . . the whole neighborhood where CCA is located.

GS to Gracie: How did you first get involved in Mothers for Justice?

Gracie: I became involved through a flyer that was placed in my door when I was staying in this neighborhood. . . . I was always interested in doing [this] stuff. I was always active in my kids' schools. . . . It wasn't exactly the same kind of advocacy work that I do now. I always had wanted this speak-out kind of stuff. It seemed like, you know how you see in the movies, God sends a flyer out of the sky when you want to do something.

GS to Jennifer: How did you get involved in Mothers for Justice?

Jennifer: I never, ever wanted to be an activist. I seen the want-ads, looking for activists, and I could never see myself being an activist. My girlfriend, Gracie, was at the time the President of Mothers for Justice. She said, "Oh, I'm going to a meeting. Come there with me." We were each involved with men that knew each other. Thus, we got to know each other through [them]. The men are long gone, long forgotten, but we still keep in contact. At the time, I had just lost my apartment, just become unemployed. For the first time

---

THE METROPOLITAN PRESS (1975) "News coverage is particularly important to resource-poor groups because they lack most of the other political resources that might enable them to be heard and to affect policy directly." Id. at 1.

46. The Connecticut Department of Social Services Uniform Policy Manual describes Job Connection Services as a program for those recipients not subject to waiver provisions. See also sources cited supra note 4. Job Connection Services are not an entitlement, and are available only as long as resources are available. CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES, UNIFORM POLICY MANUAL § 9505.01 (1995) [hereinafter UNIFORM POLICY MANUAL]. Services provided under the Jobs Connection program sometimes include child care and transportation benefits. Id. at § 9505.20.
in my life, I was living with someone else, since I got my own apartment. I was looking for a way to get out of the house. I don’t like to be around anybody much. I don’t like to be dependent on anybody too much. So that’s where Mothers for Justice came in. And I went to a meeting and said, “Oh boy, here we go. A whole bunch of people pretending that they’re doing something. Let’s hear what they’re about. Hmmm.” And what was it they were working on? Pricing injustice. They were talking about, “Grocery stores are raising prices at a certain time of the month. We need to clock these people.”

I’m listening. They’re not focusing on world hunger or world peace, the thing they’re focused on I can identify with, which is around the way, day-to-day living. And I got excited. I got real excited. I liked the fact that we cared and we were trying to do something.

GS to Kecia: When did you become involved in Mothers for Justice?
Kecia: I was . . . in a shelter at the time and Krista who was the original coordinator of the group came to the shelter, and she was going around trying to recruit members for the group. Our shelter happened to be one of the ones that she came to at that time. . . . I came to a couple of the meetings she held at the shelter. . . . I was new here in town and I thought it was interesting. I thought it was a new approach in directing and helping me understand my situation. It was an avenue for me to take since I was new in the community . . . to try to get some resources. They were involved in a lot of different rallies that were going on around State issues and around a lot of different issues that concerned me about women and children and families. At the time, I had a family that was in a shelter and I was in need of affordable housing. Those were a lot of issues that they were covering at the time. And I said, “This fits me just fine.” . . . Everything she was talking about I was either going through or I was facing. So it seemed to be something I was aiming to have, to go after, to build on. She was there to help us build on our education, to help build on stable housing—whatever we was in lack of and we were wanting and we didn’t know how to go about doing. I said, “This is for me.”

GS to Barbara: When did you get involved in Mothers for Justice?
Barbara: I got involved with Mothers for Justice last year through Kecia, who is the current President of Mothers for Justice. They had a candy drive going on, and she asked me would I participate. . . . I said, “Yes,” and that’s how I got involved in it. I met Kecia through Gateway, the school we both attend; some of our classes were similar because we were on the same curriculum for awhile.

47. Jennifer is referring to the increase in inner-city grocery store prices at the time of the month when welfare recipients receive their checks. See infra Part II.E.
Mothers for Justice

B. An Introduction to MFJ: Supportive Services and Speaking Out

NEW HAVEN ADVOCATE, DECEMBER 28, 1995: Mothers for Justice and We the People are . . . lights in New Haven. In an era when few are willing to stand up to the voices in Washington that demonize poor people, MFJ and WtP plow determinedly ahead, staging small-scale protests, helping each other find jobs and schools and food. Over the last year, the two groups have helped to raise and distribute money for homeless men and women in New Haven to enroll in community colleges and adult education programs, offering a few dollars here and there for transportation and child care. MFJ has launched a food-share program in which families on welfare can get a $30 bag of groceries for $14. 48

Mothers for Justice administers several long-term programs that provide what Gracie describes as “supportive services,” albeit on a small-scale. Most of these supportive services are targeted at providing child care and transportation, the two resources that MFJ members identify as the biggest obstacles keeping women from getting off welfare. Although these services cannot fill the huge gap left by recent cuts to programs such as Job Connection, they have a significant impact for individuals. 49

MFJ projects include the Aid to Education program, which provides limited grants for child care and transportation to local students, and the Share program, a co-op that offers high-quality food at low prices in exchange for volunteer service. MFJ also is attempting to set up a cooperative child care center to aid moms returning to work and school. Finally, a local church donated to MFJ a van that members hope to repair and use for transportation to meetings and legislative hearings.

GS to Gracie: What do you and Cheri do? How would you describe it?
Gracie: Right now our role is difficult because of all the cuts and stuff, and we’re really behind the Governor with band-aids trying to help people along. I think the Aid to Education program addresses that need in a small way. But again it does address it in a small way, where it helps people who could not otherwise get to college. The Share program also does that. The Share

49. In 1995, the Connecticut General Assembly, at Republican Governor John Rowland’s urging, cut the Job Connection program through their waiver plan, which had provided childcare and transportation money to AFDC recipients attending community college and vocational training. While AFDC recipients, like other low income students, are eligible for Pell grants for their tuition, they relied on Job Connection for the ancillary services that made it possible to attend school. Job Connection was funded by federal money allocated through the JOBS program set up by the Family Support Act of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-485, 102 Stat. 2343 (1988) (codified at 42 U.S.C. §§ 601-687). Job Connection was replaced with the Reach for Jobs First program, which offers short-term workshops on basic resume-writing and job-hunting skills in an effort to place larger numbers of welfare recipients in any available work as quickly as possible. See also Jonathan Rabinovitz, Welfare Fallout Traps Mothers, N.Y. TIMES, May 19, 1995, at B1.
program is helping people make that final, last week of the month when their
food is already gone. I think in a way we're there, kind of supporting people,
just trying to help them get through all these cuts that have come down from
our legislators.

GS to Karen: What do you like about [Mothers for Justice]?
Karen: I like that it's a group of parents, cause sometimes we involve the men,
who get together concerning issues in the community. Instead of just voicing
our opinions all the time, we go out and do something about our opinions. We
go visit places—legislative meetings and all of that—and we try to be a help
in the community instead of just opening up our mouths . . . It [Mothers for
Justice] hasn't changed my goals, it's changed my perspective on life. Before,
I was one of those people who wanted to say a lot of things, but I wasn't sure
I was going to talk to people the way I wanted to. Whereas now that I'm in
this group I can feel free to get my point across. Now I feel like I'm being
heard.

GS to Barbara: What do you like about [Mothers for Justice]?
Barbara: I like Mothers for Justice because I feel that we can make a
difference. I like the unity, I like the information they give me so I can pass
[it] on to my peers.
GS: What other things have you done at Mothers for Justice in the time you've
been there?
Barbara: Basically, getting involved with people who don't know the little ins
and outs of the welfare system, how you get help for this and help for that
because nobody will tell you, you have to learn by, what's the word I'm
looking for, learn by other people telling you, networking, that's the word I'm
looking for.

GS to Marjory: What is it you like most about Mothers for Justice?
Marjory: What I like most about Mothers for Justice is that we're all friends,
and we're able to call each other if we need help or if we want to go out or
just want to talk. The way we go out into the community to discuss political
issues is very interesting. If somebody comes to us with a problem, and we
sit there and have a meeting about it and then we try to solve it some sort of
a way, like think[ing] of some way to make the problem better. We're a very
helpful group. We're out for the people and the best of their interests. We're
not selfish. We're giving.

C. Getting on Welfare

NEW YORK TIMES, FEBRUARY 17, 1995: At [a meeting of a Chicago,
Illinois group similar to Mothers for Justice] the other day, the group
Mothers for Justice welcomed a new member, who said she had been struck in the eye by her boyfriend and had lost medical coverage for her children when she tried to get a job. She said the system got in the way and suggested that she wondered if it was worth it.\footnote{50}

While many Mothers for Justice members are not comfortable revealing the private details of their life histories,\footnote{51} a number of them describe the downward cycle which brought them to AFDC. Most of them identify a few inter-related factors: physical abuse by a husband or boyfriend, insufficient education and job skills, lack of medical insurance in low-paying jobs, a dearth of child care and transportation, unenforced child support awards, and few job openings.

Sarah: I think a lot of women marry with all the promises that everything is going to be wonderful and great and then their husbands . . . My husband was a substance abuser and that took priority over everything. I never felt safe. I never had money of my own. He started bringing it home, with all of his friends being drunk. . . . My oldest son was about four or five years old and my husband was doing drugs in front of him. He still remembers. He's twenty years old. And I [felt], "I can't have this. I just can't have this," because of the way I grew up. We get married thinking everything's going to be wonderful and our husband's going to take care of us. And then they don't. What do we do? Do we stay? Or do we try to make a better life for ourselves? I moved here from Massachusetts thinking things would be better. I got a job. The department closed. I ended up in emergency housing. And it just snowballed.

Jennifer: [I] was one of those people that slipped through the cracks. I went through a real traumatic episode. I couldn't work anymore. The house froze up. All I needed was a shelter. I called up AFDC, "Look, all I need is emergency housing. Just a little while to get back on my feet. Not long. A couple of weeks or whatever." They couldn't do it for me. I had to be on welfare. I was still receiving unemployment. I still had some of my dignity. And I was still at a level where I could easily move back into the employment world. Welfare is a spiraling down situation until you hit rock-bottom. And you have to claw and teeth and bite and knock somebody out to get back up.

GS to Lorraine: When did you stop working?

\footnote{51. See Graham, supra note 32, at 108, on the way in which "[s]peaking 'from below' demands courage. The informants remind us that they are opening doors on their private lives (although some, of course, may remain firmly shut)."}
Lorraine: The doctors in Florida stopped me working. [In 1993,] I left Florida and went to Georgia. . . . The doctors there did the same thing. My medical records followed me. . . . [My daughter’s] father died and I came up for the funeral. My breathing did a lot better while I was here, so I felt, “Well if I did that good . . . why don’t I just move back to Connecticut?” So that’s what I did. So when I got here I wind up going through full surgery . . . and I find out there was a whole lot more wrong with me than I knew. So I’ve been out of work since ‘92. But I just started receiving State assistance in ‘95. So I think I did good. My money ran down. I didn’t see no other way. I needed some help.

D. Making It on Welfare

HARTFORD COURANT, FEBRUARY 14, 1996: At the lower income levels, 36.3 percent of households headed by women are below the poverty line. And, while only 4.3 percent of married, white women with families live in poverty, 67.1 percent of Latino families headed by women are poor. “Women and children on welfare do not live the good life,” said Alese Scales, spokeswoman for Women Helping Women, a Hartford-based support group for women on welfare.52

One of the most striking things about Mothers for Justice members is their resourcefulness and their ability to survive on very little. Christian Community Action runs a food pantry and each day women with children wait patiently for food in the CCA lobby. The number of families requesting food always increases dramatically at the end of the month.

An MFJ strategy for opposing additional welfare cuts has been presenting members’ budgets before the Human Services Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly. Cheri said she hoped this would demonstrate concretely that women were barely surviving on welfare. One Mothers for Justice member, who has three children living with her, testified that she receives $543/month in AFDC, and that, before moving into a shelter, she paid about $225/month rent. Lights and gas cost $85/month, and laundry about $40/month. Taking the bus cost about $15/month, while cab fare costs about $25/month.

As the speaker described her miscellaneous costs, the names of household items bounced incongruously off the walls of the Committee room: toothpaste, toilet paper, deodorant, feminine pads or tampons, freezer bags, garbage bags, hair grease, soap, bleach, shampoo, soap powders. All this totalled about $170 a month. Looking back over the budget later, I realized that she had forgotten to include the cost of food for her family of four.

Sarah: I would like to see Governor Rowland live on $500/month. I would love to trade places with him. . . . I don't even need the amount of money he makes per year, I can live on very little. I'm not looking to be a millionaire, but I would like to see him come down here and live down here. I don't think he could do it because I don't think he has a clue. I don't think he knows how to make ends meet when you've got this much money and this many bills. . . . If you're on welfare, you meet other people that are on welfare. So I know this for a fact. We're living in situations where we will do anything we need to do to take care of our families. I know people that sell drugs to make ends meet. I know women that sell themselves to make ends meet, that [stay] in relationships that are bad for themselves to make ends meet, to take care of their children, to feed their children. I can't say that if I was dirt broke, in the street with no place to go that I wouldn't do the same thing. You can't say, "Oh, I would never do that." If it came down to feeding your children? You don't know what you would do!

Sharon: I'd rather work than be on the State.53 It only helps you pay your rent, or maybe a bill. Because I get $639 a month, only get enough to pay my rent and my lights and then you got a gas bill, they want you to pay that, how you gonna pay that?

Marjory: I was on the State for a couple of years, and I think that it had done something to me, it had brought me down. That whole thing of going to get your check, standing in line for hours to get it cashed, and going grocery shopping with so many other people going grocery shopping at the same time that they run out of things that you want to buy, and waiting on the long lines, and you have this big carriage of food and you need to have a car to get all your groceries home cause you have to buy everything at one time when you do go to the grocery store, so you have to call a cab. The whole headache of it.

GS to Marjory: What kinds of things about the legislators, what things in their backgrounds and in their environments make it hard for them [to understand what people on assistance go through]?

Marjory: Just the whole growing up process is different when you have enough money in your household to survive. If you have enough money, that really kind of solves a lot of your problems because there's really nothing much else to worry about. . . . It's the money that makes that difference. And it can cause a whole lot of stress if you're sitting there worrying about, "Well, we can't have dinner tonight, we'll just have to eat a peanut butter sandwich, this is our dinner." Maybe eat half of it because you have to eat the other half for

53. The term "the State" refers to the AFDC program.
breakfast or something. It’s not funny, but it happens. Poor people get used to that lifestyle and that’s the way it is. They don’t see it as being poor, they don’t really see themselves as being poor. They see that’s the way it is and they wish that they could do better.

E. The Pricing Project: Helping Members to Make Ends Meet

NEW HAVEN REGISTER, MAY 5, 1994: City welfare mothers were the hosts of their own game show on the City Green Wednesday, but there were no fabulous prizes and nobody wanted what was behind Door No. 1. “The Price is Wrong,” a spoof on the popular game show “The Price is Right,” was staged by members of Mothers for Justice to show their discontent over unfair pricing at area grocery stores. . . . Members of Mothers for Justice said their recent survey of prices at the New Haven and Cheshire stores showed sharply higher prices at the urban store. They believe higher prices are charged at the city branch because poor, urban residents don’t have transportation to go elsewhere.54

Mothers for Justice responds to the pressures of making it on welfare through direct actions as well as supportive services. In Spring 1994, MFJ staged a protest on the New Haven Green decrying price gouging by grocers. Group members perceived that prices were higher in urban areas than suburban areas, and that prices would sometimes rise on the first weekend of each month, when women receiving assistance shopped for food. As a result of the demonstration, MFJ worked out a settlement with Ferraro’s grocers whereby the members agreed to pass out sale flyers in their neighborhoods in exchange for the introduction of Ferraro’s coupons on the flyers. This was an innovation because it was the first time Ferraro’s had issued either sale flyers or coupons.

GS to Kecia: What are some of the things that you’ve been involved with at Mothers for Justice that really stand out in your mind?

Kecia: We did an outstanding event on the Green which was the Pricing Project. That was very outstanding. We accomplished a lot with that, we put a lot into it. It helped a lot of women in the group. Instead of saying, we’re just a group that sit around and talk, we’re a group that get out and do. We’re about doing. We’re about doing action, that’ll bring about a reaction about concerns we faced. We don’t just all come together to hear concerns, we try to do something about those concerns. And we try to motivate each other in the group. . . . [W]e were successful with some of the retailers, the managers of the stores, in working out a deal with handing out flyers during the summer

months. In other words, we were passing out the flyers in the communities and they were getting the business.

Jennifer: The Price Injustice campaign, that was fantastic. That actually put Mothers for Justice on the map. . . . After that, everybody wanted them, “Oh, can you just come speak to our group? Oh, can we just come sit and watch?” Hmmm. Yeah, whatever. And the final rally which was downtown on the Green, that was awesome.

F. Coalition With We the People

NEW HAVEN REGISTER, DECEMBER 1, 1995: “I woke up buried alive in snow,” said [Tere] Davis, one of dozens of homeless people who protested in front of City Hall Thursday, enraged they have been shut out of shelters even on the coldest nights. . . . The afternoon rally . . . was organized by two local grass-roots groups—We the People, made up of homeless and formerly homeless men and women, and Mothers for Justice, a group of women with children who are or were on welfare.

One of Mothers for Justice’s closest allies is We the People, the grassroots organization of mostly homeless men and some homeless women that founded the New Haven Homeless Resource Center. At the time of this project, the organizers of We the People—Les, Tere and Bob—spent some time almost every day with Gracie and Cheri at the Christian Community Action office. The two groups support one another’s activities, and leadership of both groups comprises an “Organizing Committee.”

Interestingly, since We the People is largely, although not wholly, male, it is sometimes perceived as “the men’s group,” while Mothers for Justice is known as “the women’s group.” Although this gendered perception is not completely accurate, since We the People includes female members, it contains some element of truth, since caretaker relatives receiving AFDC are usually women.

GS to Barbara: What are some changes you’ve seen in Mothers for Justice in the time you’ve been involved so far?

Barbara: I think that we’re more visible now . . . cause we’re getting involved in a lot of projects with a lot of different organizations like SOHPA [Save Our Homeless People Association], the Warriors [for Real Welfare Reform], We the People, so we got a lot of joint projects going on around here and because of that we’re more visible . . . stronger.

GS to Karen: Can you tell me about a time when, as a part of Mothers for Justice, you spoke out and you felt good about speaking out?
Karen: We [Mothers for Justice and We the People] did a Homeless Congress. And I felt good about that. I'm not homeless, but I know there's others out there that's homeless, and I'm not in this program just to help myself. Just because I'm a welfare recipient that's married doesn't mean I should overlook others. . . [t]hat was a very uplifting experience for me because I just didn't look at myself and see how I can help people in my situation, I helped others.

GS to Nora: We've been trying to do a lot of efforts lately speaking out against welfare reform. And I was wondering what you thought about those different efforts, what's been effective and what's not?
Nora: One thing that I thought would be effective about the [April 27th] rally on welfare reform was the issues about women or men dealing with homelessness. I understand that situation cause I had a couple of friends deal with that, and I think that's an important issue. I think that would be effective to a lot of women that are in that situation. And the issue of AIDS. I don't really think there is any information that will not be effective, because to me a lot of it is very important because I don't know if I will have to face a lot of those issues.

III. FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

A. Punitive Cuts to Cash Assistance and Supportive Services

AMERICAN POLITICAL NETWORK, INC., FEBRUARY 23, 1996: Gov. Rowland won approval last year from the CT Legislature and the federal government to begin imposing a 21-month limit on AFDC benefits. . . . For single adults and childless couples [on General Assistance], anyone who is classified by the state as 'employable' is limited to six months of benefits. Legislation already in effect reduces the amount of money a woman receives by $50 if she has another child while on the rolls.56

HARTFORD COURANT, JANUARY 30, 1996: The idea behind shrinking benefits and imposing a 21-month limit on them is to get parents back to work. The plan assumes there will be employment for 9000 welfare parents a year. That's a big assumption. . . . [T]o reduce AFDC and general assistance rolls by the numbers suggested, job growth would have to reach 11 percent. To put this task into perspective . . .

employment grew at an annual rate no higher than 5.1 percent during the affluent 1980s.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{NEW YORK TIMES, MAY 19, 1995:} Gov. Rowland has embarked on an ambitious program to move 40,000 families off the welfare rolls and into employment as rapidly as possible over the next four years. To achieve that goal, he needs to place a large number of people fast. And so, the Republican Governor has decided to abandon the state's long-range education and job training program, which now typically takes two or more years to complete, and replace it with a brief job placement service that will reach more welfare recipients, but teach them more modest skills like how to write resumes, look for work and be responsible employees.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{HARTFORD COURANT, FEBRUARY 14, 1996:} Rowland, in his budget message last week, proposed cutting $13.5 million from the [Rental Assistance] program's current budget of $14.4 million. He would leave intact money that helps pay the rent of elderly people living in congregate housing, but eliminate as of July 1 funding that subsidizes rents of about 2500 poor families across the state.\textsuperscript{59}

The major threats facing Mothers for Justice members in the Spring of 1996 were additional cuts and "drop-dead" time limits to public benefits programs in Connecticut. In 1995, Connecticut applied for a federal waiver allowing it to implement some of the toughest welfare cuts in the nation,\textsuperscript{60} imposing a 21-month durational limit on mothers receiving AFDC\textsuperscript{61} and a family cap that halves the increase in benefits for each additional child conceived while the parent is on AFDC.\textsuperscript{62}

A little over a year later, in August 1996, President Clinton signed into law national welfare cuts under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which replaced the AFDC program with a system of block grants to the states for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).\textsuperscript{63} Since Connecticut had already received a waiver from

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} \textit{Give Welfare Reform Time to Work}, HARTFORD COURANT, Jan. 30, 1996, at A8.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Rabinovitz, supra note 49, at B1.
\item \textsuperscript{60} The Family Support Act of 1988, 42 U.S.C. § 1315 (1994), expanded state discretion to conduct experiments with AFDC programs. Many states, including Connecticut, have applied for waivers from usual programs and procedures to implement a variety of workfare proposals. See S.B. 929 § 1(a), Reg. Sess. (Conn. 1996) ("The commissioner of social services shall seek a waiver from federal law to conduct research and demonstration programs designed to support self-sufficiency and family unity for recipients of aid to families with dependent children."); see also Minow, supra note 16, at 620.
\item \textsuperscript{61} CONN. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 17b-112(b)(1) (West Supp. 1996).
\item \textsuperscript{62} CONN. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 17b-112(b)(10) (West Supp. 1996).
\end{itemize}
the federal government to implement its own state program of welfare cuts in 1995, the Connecticut Reach for Jobs First [Jobs First] program passed by the General Assembly in 1995 continues to govern until the expiration of the waiver in July 1997.64 When Mothers for Justice members go to their periodic AFDC benefit redetermination meetings with case workers, most are now informed that the 21-month clock is ticking.65

In addition, the Connecticut General Assembly cut the Jobs Connection program,66 which provided MFJ members enrolled in college with child care and transportation. Although students already enrolled in Job Connection (including several MFJ members) were allowed to remain, no more were allowed to enroll. Instead, women were required to attend short-term "job readiness" workshops as part of the Reach for Jobs First program.67 Rather than focusing on education and training for permanent, skilled positions, these workshops encourage women to take any available job.

In her November 1995, letter to recipients describing the change from Job Connection to the Reach for Jobs First program, State of Connecticut Welfare Commissioner Joyce Thomas wrote,

Working at a job is the best way for you to support your family and the new program is designed to encourage you to do this. Because of this new design, some of the things we used to pay for have been changed. Since the new focus is on jobs, some of the benefits used in the past to support education and training will not be needed and will end. Generally, we will help you find a job before further education or training is considered.68

Mothers for Justice members argue that there are not enough jobs for the unemployed individuals currently seeking work in Connecticut, and that the


65. The law provides certain exceptions to the twenty-one month time limit for certain categories of families, including those in which the caretaker relative is incapacitated or unemployable, is suffering a complicated pregnancy, is herself a minor child, or is caring for a child under one year of age who was born not more than ten months after the family began receiving benefits. CONN. GEN. STAT. ANN. 17b-112(b) (West Supp. 1996).


67. UNIFORM POLICY MANUAL, supra note 46, at § 9865.

68. Letter from Joyce A. Thomas, Commissioner, Connecticut Department of Social Services, to Recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (Nov. 1995) (on file with author).
path to permanent paid labor is through education. They also point out that they are required to leave their small children to work outside the home, while middle-class women are praised for being full-time care-givers.\(^6^\)

When the legislative session began in January, 1996, additional cuts were proposed, including drastic reductions to the Rental Assistance Program (RAP),\(^7^\) durational limits to the General Assistance Program,\(^7^\)\(^1\) and the elimination of optional Medicaid services.\(^7^\)\(^2\) The elimination of RAP, too, threatens women who are attempting to complete a course of study in order to make the transition from welfare to work.

Mothers for Justice members discuss what they are facing under the new regulations:

Sarah: I don’t know what Governor Rowland thinks he’s doing, I really don’t. He’s going about it all the wrong way. I don’t have the answers, but I certainly won’t do what he’s doing. I think the women and the children are the ones who get kicked around, especially if you’re poor, cause a lot of us don’t vote. . . . I pay a small portion for my rent [on the Rental Assistance Program], which enables me to live. I mean I can feed myself and my kids. I don’t have money left over to do a lot of things, but I’m O.K. now. If they cut Rental Assistance Program . . . I will most likely have to drop out of school and work full-time at a job that pays me minimum wage because I don’t have the education to get anything else. . . . I sat down and figured it out and a minimum wage job would pay [just] my rent and that would be it. Even if I moved to a cheaper rent, it would pay [just] my rent. I wouldn’t be able to have insurance for a car, which would make me have to drag my children out to the bus to go shopping or to the doctors or any of the many other places. . . . I’m financially responsible for all of my children because my ex-husband is unreliable to say the least. . . . So, it’s very difficult. It’s hard now with the money I do or don’t have, going to school, getting the kids up every day, with everything including money for gas and, God forbid, my car breaks down. . . . I’ll be O.K. in three years because I’m getting an education and I’ll get a job. But if they do this now, if they pull the rug out, if they cut straight across the board for everybody and don’t take into consideration certain people’s situations, it’s not fair. There are a lot of us who are trying to get up out of this hole that we’re in. It just isn’t fair.

---

\(^6^\) Shay, Journal Entry, supra note 36, at Apr. 4, 1996; see also Minow, supra note 16, at 823 ("Mothers with young children now are not viewed as the ‘deserving poor’ who should be subsidized by society. This is a dramatic shift in that while AFDC once excused mothers of young children from paid labor, now the program expects them to work.").

\(^7^\) S.B. 22, Reg. Sess. (Conn. 1996).

\(^7^\) S.B. 21, Reg. Sess. (Conn. 1996).

\(^7^\) S.B. 70, Reg. Sess. (Conn. 1996).
GS to Karen: What are you facing now with the welfare cuts?
Karen: [T]his was the first semester I wasn't able to go into college. My financial aid was awarded, but I didn't have child care. With the welfare reforms being the way they are now, the only way you are awarded child care is if you are working. I don't have the skills right now to work. And the skills that I do possess, the jobs that I would get, I couldn't afford child care. So I wanted to stay in school right now. Because of the new laws they passed and the welfare reform, I could not go to school like I want to. Because I can't afford child care. Not only can I not afford child care, I can't afford transportation. It's been on hold right now, as far as my goals. . . . I don't believe you can just eliminate someone off the State and just assume that they'll be living. But I do agree with the idea of elimination, just not in the time period they have. Work with them. If you see that they aren't doing O.K. towards the end of their period, then you don't eliminate them. . . . So I have mixed points on the issue of the welfare reform. I'm not for the welfare reform that they have passed now.

GS to Marjory: What are your feelings about the recent welfare cuts?
Marjory: I think it's harming a lot of people. I don't think they [politicians] realize just how much harm they're doing. They think they're doing something good. It's not really good. They're not connected enough with the people that are on the welfare directly. They're indirectly connected, listening to the media or other people's comments instead of the people themselves. They don't really know what's going on. They're missing a gap. I think maybe most of the legislators are in a position where they couldn't understand no matter what you did to them. They would probably have to go back into time and then start their whole lives over to remember what real problems there are and the stress of dealing with them. Not problems like "Should I buy the blue Mercedes or the red one?". . . . The way they grew up, maybe their parents had money. They had the mother and the father figure, and there was always milk on the table. There was never a layoff. There was always heat in the house. You never had to worry about the lights being turned off, or didn't have to fight over the television. Or worry about mom because she's so stressed out that she can't pay attention to you. So many things are blocking their view of the people and their needs.

GS to Kecia: Can you tell me your feelings about the cuts, the fingerprinting, the mandatory drug-testing?
Kecia: The overall welfare to workfare slogan that they're trying to direct us to I totally agree with. There should be a change. But about how the change is going about, I don't think it's reasonable for some of the people. It's taken so many years to create. They're just gonna come and just wipe everything out from under their seat and expect them to just go out and be directed . . .
in their career. I don't think it is possible. Because it was a growth pattern for me, being on AFDC, before I ever got to college, not having any background experience. I went back to get my GED, then I went on to college. But it took me seven years to get the GED. Now I'm in college. And there are some people out there who don't even have a GED. For them to just come in there and slap them in the face and just pull everything out from under them, I don't think that is fair. . . . Nobody wants to sit around and be on welfare. You gotta realize what it took for these people to motivate their self-esteem to go back and go to school. . . . I do agree that something has to be done, but it does take a process for this to be done. I definitely agree with the welfare to the workfare, but it also takes a process . . . more resources, more information, more communities, more organizations being involved.

GS to Iva: From what I'm hearing, you don't have a lot of faith in social welfare programs or charities to really make a lasting change. Is that correct? Iva: I don't think that the way they stand now that they will make a lasting change because it's gone too far. When they're talking about smaller government, they're really talking about is less interference in people's lives. But they're screwing it up when they say they're going to spend less money on certain programs. That's really impossible for them to spend less money. All they're going to do is shift the money from one place to another. I'm sad to say, even though the orphanage situation has been put on the back burner, it still looks like it's something that's bound to come.

GS to Barbara: What do you think about some of the cuts that are happening? Barbara: I think that they're trying to do too much too fast. I think that they should be phased out gradually, if they feel they have to phase it out. Frankly, I don't think they should have to phase it out. First of all, there is no jobs. What are people going to support themselves on if they do cut them off? . . . [T]he children, how are they going to eat? They cut all these federal programs. I feel that is going to make things a lot worse. If you have a child, you can't just take the bottle from the child, you have to wean the child off gradually cause just cutting them off all together I don't think is gonna work. There's gonna be a lot more homeless people out there in the world. There's gonna be a lot more crime out there in the world, because people have to do whatever they need to do to survive. That's what I feel is going to happen as a result of these welfare cuts.

GS to Elizabeth: What points did you want to get across to the legislators [at a press conference on the effects of the welfare cuts]? Elizabeth: It seems like to me, the United States is basically targeting the welfare and the welfare recipients. But what they fail to realize is that the economy—the people that are on welfare, sometimes they have to resort to
certain things in order to survive. Basically, the point that I wanted to get across is that . . . it's O.K. to tell people to go out and get a job, but what they need to do is to train the people to prepare them to go out into the workforce. Not just send them out there in a boat, you know, in the water, to swim or drown. That's basically what they're doing, they're telling you, "Either you're going to swim, or you're going to drown." . . . [W]e're not up here twiddling our thumbs. Some people had to resort to this. Resort to this! There's some people that had to stop going to school to take care of their family because their parents died and they were the oldest and they had to do these things. So, therefore, they're not educated. And they're sending them out here. Half of them have to go get their GED and their diploma before they can actually get a job.

Jennifer: [N]ow they want to cut out welfare. [W]e are the donkey that is so easily seen. We're standing in the middle of the street going, "Heehaw! Heehaw!" And they want to kick us in the butt. O.K. But if they look around, they'll see that there's a whole bunch of other things out there that are worse than that donkey in the middle of the street. We might be heehawing because there is a thorn in our foot. Let's look at the thorn. Well, the thorn is the medical association that cuts out a couple thousand dollars more than what they do.73 If they'd just let the welfare recipient see the bill for what they're being charged for before it goes to them! Because I know God-goodness well, all the surgery I went through, I know they trumped up charges. I've went to [the hospital] with [private insurance] being my insurance. Oh, my goodness! It's a whole new world. They did testing only that was necessary. They treated me differently. I've been on AFDC off and on. I never had a job that offered medical, so I never knew a different way to be treated. I could understand if these welfare recipients owned a house, a brand new car, a lovely wardrobe, wore fourteen carat gold jewelry head to toe, got their hair done every day, every week, and so on. Then, by all means, bust their tails! But a lot of welfare recipients that are even working and receiving are still just making ends meet! And still coming below poverty level. And what welfare offers is even below the poverty level. It's sub-human! It's ridiculous.

GS to Nora: Having gone through [Reach for Jobs First], what are your thoughts on it?
Nora: At first, I had negative feelings about the program, and I turned the negativeness into the positive. I went to the program, and I began to help other women to write résumés and bring in inspirational information to help them get through the whole process. Considering the fact that we were forced to do this job readiness program. . . . It's the idea of being forced to do something. I'm the type of person that I don't like to be forced. I guess I had to get my

73. Referring to fraud by medical providers receiving Medicaid reimbursements.
mind motivated, say, "O.K., well I'm here, now I have to do it." Come in with a positive attitude. . . . I left there with a good reference from the workshop leader. So I'm hoping that that will take me further.

GS to Cheri: What do you think the sentiment in the community is [about the welfare cuts]?
Cheri: [T]here's still a certain amount of disbelief that the time limits are going to really happen. In spite of all the information we've tried to get out to people, all the talks that we've done about it. People just don't think that they're going to get cut off. There are a number of women now who are having to participate in these Jobs First training programs that DSS [Department of Social Services] is putting on and I've been really concerned about the expectations that they're raising in women's minds about jobs they're going to get. I don't see that the jobs are there. I don't see people getting the jobs, I don't see people getting jobs that they're going to be able to keep because of the child care concerns and the family stress that they have.

GS to Sharon: Do you feel that you have any input or say in government, or do you think government does pretty much what it wants to do?
Sharon: They [politicians] do whatever they want to do. To me, they been wanting to do away with welfare, but I guess they didn't have anybody in the chair like Rowland to do it. . . . [M]e and a lot of girls sit around and say, "One day, they just gonna cut welfare out and what you gonna do then?" Basically, we said we just gotta get a job and we just gotta deal with it. And then we said, "Well, we can't!" . . . There's already a lot of stealing, and breaking in and robbing now. It's gonna be even worser when that happens. It's gonna be a lot worser.

B. Speaking Out: Legislative Testimony

STOP THE WAR ON THE POOR. YOUR VOICE CAN BE HEARD.
PUBLIC HEARINGS: THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 15, 1996 ROOM 2C LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING 5:00 PM & THE HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 20, 1996 ROOM 2A 10:00 AM.74

HARTFORD COURANT, FEBRUARY 21, 1996: As babies wailed in the background and guide dogs shuffled under front-row seats, state Social Services Commissioner Joyce A. Thomas told lawmakers Tuesday that cuts in programs for the poor are inevitable. Thomas was direct about the need to cut health benefits, cash assistance and rental subsidies,

---

74. Flyer from Connecticut Alliance for Basic Human Needs, Stop the War on the Poor (Feb. 1996) (on file with author).
spelling out in detail the potential savings to the state. . . . But such arguments rang hollow for 27-year-old Jeanette Simon of West Haven, who tearfully testified that without the state Medicaid subsidy, she won’t be able to properly care for her 2-year-old daughter, who suffers from asthma.75

Several times during the 1996 legislative session, members of Mothers for Justice and We the People traveled from New Haven to Hartford to testify before the Human Services and Appropriations Committees of the Connecticut General Assembly. Each time, MFJ members prepared testimony, arranged babysitters and carpools, and missed classes to testify. Each time, they arrived early and signed in on the roster. And each and every time they waited most of the day to testify before a dwindling group of legislators who were usually inattentive and often disrespectful.76

I accompanied MFJ members to Hartford on February 20, 1996, the day the Human Services Committee heard testimony on the elimination of the Rental Assistance Program (RAP),77 durational limits to General Assistance (GA),78 and the reduction of optional Medicaid services.79 As we watched, senators and representatives humiliated one citizen after another by asking prying questions and belittling their concerns.

State Senator Fred Lovegrove (R-Fairfield) asked a homeless Vietnam veteran concerned about durational limits on GA why he was seeking work as a chef, when auto mechanics were better paid. The quick-thinking veteran replied, “Not nowadays. I mean, everybody wants to eat. Not everybody has a car.”80 Senator Lovegrove responded, “I know I pay a lot more attention to my car than what I put in my stomach though.”81 To which the veteran countered, “Well, the car I’d be able to afford might be a $150 clunker, you know, compared to someone buying a $25,000 car.”82

Senator Lovegrove also engaged in some myth-making regarding the Rental Assistance Program, stating on the record that “one of the department’s
employees" had phoned him to tell him that "in a suburban community there was a person" receiving a RAP certificate while living in a condominium with a swimming pool and tennis court, at a rent of $900/month. For mothers struggling to make ends meet with the help of RAP, such blatant stereotyping was cruel and insensitive.

Finally, our last MFJ member reached the podium to present her monthly budget. After presenting her budget, she concluded, "I don't look for no hand-outs. If the training and everything was there, . . . I'll be glad to accept the training. As long as they can pay me a decent amount or have some jobs out here that's going to help me pay my bills and take care of my family. And then I would never have to even worry about state assistance." Senator Lovegrove's response to this mother's concerns was to criticize her phone bill, remarking that she must make "a lot of toll calls." Throughout this seemingly futile exercise, Gracie reassured the MFJ members who were testifying while Cheri buttonholed legislators in the hallway. At one point, I overheard Gracie pointing out to two MFJ members that the entire atmosphere of the Hearing Room was set up to intimidate citizens who were testifying. "Look at how much higher up they sit than we do," Gracie said. "They're just human beings like we are," she reminded MFJ members, "they just happen to have a little power." Despite the long wait, poor attendance by legislators, and impertinent questions, MFJ members felt a sense of relief and accomplishment after testifying. At least for a moment, they had made their voices heard.

Sarah: [W]hen I went up to the General Assembly, I knew I wasn't going to get to talk. So I sat there and watched. As soon as everybody would get up to go to the bathroom, I would get them in the hall. When I was just getting ready to leave, Cheri grabbed me and took me up to the Co-Chair, Keeley. I've got his letter right here. I've re-did this like four times. . . . This [letter] is the speech I wrote to read. It wasn't this good. So I'm sort of glad I didn't [read it] . . . and then there's other things that I added. As a matter of fact, I've made a bunch of mistakes and I'm not changing this. They're going to look at this and say, well she's going to secretarial school and she needs more schooling.

Kecia: [W]e go up to Hartford to the legislators' meetings. . . . [L]ast year Job Connection was a major component for the legislators to aim at, to cut us

off without anything. It was up to us how we make it with daycare and education and transportation back and forth to school. It was one of their proposals. . . . [W]e spoke up, we wrote up a proposal, and they grandfathered us in. A lot of people say it doesn’t make a difference if you speak up, but that was one time I know that I was involved and it made a difference. So that was very successful for me.

GS to Kecia: That experience of going to speak to the legislators—what was that like? Were they receptive?

Kecia: When we went up I was very nervous because it was something new for me. It was something that really stands out in my mind. I think that one of the people from We the People [was testifying] and . . . I think it was two of the Republican guys [who] were legislators . . . they sat over to the far right hand side and put their hands together and totally had their own conversation the whole time he was speaking. I thought that was so rude. We’re here spilling our guts telling you we don’t think this is right and how it’s affecting us, and you’re here with your hands together, thumbling [twiddling] them and having your own conversation. Then they left early, before the person got done speaking, and I thought that was so rude. I wasn’t appreciative of that. Going up, you want to be heard. Sometimes it might not seem to point out that you’re being heard but it’s something that you got to do for yourself.

GS to Karen: What was it like, going to testify for legislative hearings?

Karen: It was exciting, it really was. We went to a couple of the legislative meetings, and we also went to a couple of the lobbying meetings, and a couple of the camps they have when they’re going to prep you for certain things. And it was exciting because it was nice to finally see what the legislature does behind people’s doors as far as when they begin to vote for things and stuff like that. So, I enjoyed myself.

GS to Jennifer: You were talking about going to a legislative hearing. Tell me more about that experience.

Jennifer: You know, I probably have my article up on the wall from . . . January of last year. We went up to the lawmakers and we talked to them about increasing welfare benefits. [Y]ou know, you thought there was going to be a full panel of people! And you had two Republicans there, and then you had like three people in the front, I think they were Democrats. Whether they were Democrats or not, they were open-minded. . . . I put on my nice little suit. I got suited up. Cause I wasn't too far from the last time I wore professional clothing. So I put on my little suit and so on, and I was up there trying to write down what I was going to say. I work best right off the bat. People went up and spoke about not cutting the GA and so on. And I watched how everybody went up. They have a desk, and you sit down at the desk and
talk. To me, it seems like they're sitting above you. And you speak. I'm sitting there, and I'm watching, and there were two young Republicans off to the side. They were playing with a little ball of paper! They were knocking it back and forth between each other! And I thought that was rude . . . I don't know what made me stand instead of sitting but I did. First of all, everybody's . . . speaking in this tone of voice [drone]. It's very, very easy to ignore someone. I was nervous, and when I'm nervous, my voice throws. Everything is clear and precise. The syllables are crisp and clear. And I spoke. . . . I took a little bit of [public speaking classes] . . . And that was probably part of the reason why I stood. I was used to standing and giving speeches rather than sitting. And I went for the eye contact. This is something that is second nature for me. I spoke to the people in front and they were like, "Hmmm." And I looked at the two young ones on the side, "Yes, little boys." And as I spoke, all of a sudden, I actually saw them look up, and stop playing. I was like "Wooooow!" They say that the best way to get their attention is to give them heartfelt stories. And you have to think, all day long they are probably listening to tear-jerkers. And, you know, after awhile you get numb to it. So I can understand that. . . . And I didn't really give that much of a sob-sob story. . . . Basically, what I said to them was how difficult it was to go to work when you come home and you're not sure you're going to have your place because you can't afford the rent, and if you're going to have a phone because you can't pay the bill, and electricity and gas. You're hoping that October rolls around cause they can turn it on by law and it's winter time and you can at least have a few months of having those on again and so on. Just how difficult that was. I'm not too sure how powerful what I had to say was. But I know what I said definitely got through. They heard some of it. So, once again, Mothers for Justice was so supportive.

Sarah: Personally, I don't feel that we got the respect we deserved because a lot of those people got up and walked out and left. Nobody was listening after awhile. People got up to testify, and these people were talking to each other—weren't even listening to who was talking. That's not right. We deserve just as much respect as they do. We couldn't have gotten away with doing that. So, I don't think they should have conducted themselves the way that they did. Some of us traveled up there and sat there all day. That's their job. They got paid for what they were doing. I skipped school to go up there, I missed classes to go up there. I missed work. They should've listened to us, attentively, and given us the respect that they would have wanted. That's one of the things that really irritated me about that whole thing.

Jennifer: Reserved, that's me. Miss Reserved. I'm flamboyant and colorful around my friends. When it comes to the spotlight, I really like to take the backseat. But if there is a politician or some large figure who is mouthing off
and—basically, I hate to see somebody trying to get over on the small people using large words, or trying to use logic, or switch words around. Or what they like to do is, when you ask them a direct question, they say, “Well, first we woke up and brushed our teeth. And then after we went to McDonald’s, we swung back around and went by the old school homeboy.” . . . [T]hey blow you off. I do get side-tracked, but when I’m speaking with a politician or somebody in office . . . I’m focused on the answer. Basically in my mind I’m taking down “O.K., this has absolutely nothing to do with—” I’m waiting for something to do with the question. Then I’ll redirect. . . . But that’s my problem. I try to take the backseat, but I can’t stand seeing injustice. I’m Superwoman!!

GS to Cheri: How do you think people who go to testify at the General Assembly experience that event, and do you think it is an effective strategy?
Cheri: It feels like a necessary strategy. I don’t necessarily feel like it’s an effective strategy. I think that . . . people have little glimmers of feeling powerful when they [testify before the legislature] because people are able to speak out about their own experiences in a setting where people are actually sometimes listening. I think there’s a lot of anticipation, but I think it’s not usually a good experience overall. I think it’s a negative experience for people. The women and the men that we brought from the [New Haven Homeless] Resource Center have usually felt that it hasn’t made a big difference. . . . I go back and forth between thinking, “Oh, we shouldn’t do this to people,” because it can be really degrading and legislators can ask such asinine questions and be torturous, and then feeling that if nobody does it then they’ll never know how people’s real lives are because they don’t get out of their little ivory towers. They don’t come down to the level where people are living. They never know otherwise. So it’s like a necessary evil.

GS to Gracie: When we went to do the legislative testimony, you were [talking] about different things the legislators do to make people feel intimidated. Can you talk more about that?
Gracie: I think this whole system is bogus, it’s a big pot of crock, to put it nicely. The way the chairs are set up . . . they [legislators] have nice comfortable seats and we have very uncomfortable seats. They get up and walk out after you spent all day up there waiting to testify, to tell what you have to say, and they walk out. By the time you get to testify there’s only one of them left. All that stuff is very disrespectful. And it makes . . . people feel intimidation. . . . First of all you come to the Legislative Office Building and it’s this big, great looking building. You’re sitting there to testify in front of legislators, who are only policy makers (who work for us). People often think legislators are gods. I don’t, any more. At one time I did have that [attitude] but I don’t anymore. . . . You have to realize that they’re there to serve you.
A lot of people haven’t gotten that. We go there and they’re sitting there, and you’re talking to them and different little assistants are running in whispering stuff. Most people associate this with a very important person that has all this activity. Even if you do wear a tie, even if you put your best clothes on, you don’t feel equal to them, and it intimidates people. I think it stops a lot of people from going. If I had my way, we would sit at a round table, even if we had to have them on one end and us on the other. It would be a round table and all the chairs would be the same. They would call a group of people up at a time. Everyone would be wearing potato sacks. That’s how we would do it.

C. An Alternative Lobbying Strategy: The Warriors’ Job Hunt Day

JOB HUNTING DAY: ARE YOU CONCERNED WITH ALL THE CUTS IN PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AND OTHER PROGRAMS TO HELP THE POOR? DOES THE MESSAGE “GET A JOB OR ELSE . . . .”, MEAN SOMETHING TO YOU? DO YOU LACK [A] BABYSITTER FOR JOB SEARCHING ON YOUR OWN? DO YOU LACK TRANSPORTATION FOR JOB SEARCHING? YOU HAVE BEEN LOOKING AND LOOKING, BUT NO JOB IS IN SIGHT?? ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOUR CHILDREN, ONCE YOUR (21 MONTH) TIME LIMIT IS UP? JOIN US: WARRIORS FOR REAL WELFARE REFORM, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 1996, 9:00 a.m. (SHARP), 30 ARBOR STREET.87

HARTFORD COURANT, MARCH 1, 1996: 150 people went to the [Capitol] Building Thursday to protest cuts in welfare benefits pushed by Gov. John G. Rowland. The rally was organized by a coalition of community groups that call themselves Warriors for Real Welfare Reform.88

On February 29, 1996, Mothers for Justice’s ally organization in Hartford, Warriors for Real Welfare Reform, hired a bus and took a group of women and children on a Job Hunt Day that included a protest march in the Legislative Office Building. Chanting, “We Want Jobs!” Warriors and supporters marched through the Legislative Office Building hallways.

Protestors demanded jobs, child care, and transportation from the legislators who last session told them to join the paid labor force. Women on welfare reiterated their desire for jobs that provide a living wage. “I don’t

want to work at McDonald's," said one job-seeker. "I'm a certified nurse's aide. I have put in applications at hospitals and nursing homes." 89

The Warriors held legislators' attention longer than they had at the Human Services Committee hearing a week earlier, when group members had testified before an inattentive, disrespectful panel. However, the Warriors protest also garnered some negative comments. Senator Fred Lovegrove (R-Fairfield), in particular, was vexed that protestors had disturbed the routine of the Committee Hearings. "If they want to have an impact on what we do here, I think they went about it the wrong way," he said. "They were disruptive. They were a week late." 90 But this time they were heard.

A Mothers for Justice member describes her mixed feelings about the Warriors Job Hunt Day:

*Iva:* What I really want to talk about is what happened after the last rally at the Capitol [the Job Hunt Day] when [a Warriors member] came in [to the Public Hearing Room and verbally confronted the legislators]. I listened to her, and she was no one but myself a few years ago. I saw *déjà vu* when I saw her. I was able to listen to some feedback from the results of that, and it was negative, and it was terrible. The Representatives and the Senators were saying that she came up there, and she said she was representing all the people who are supposed to be affected by these cuts. Her actions caused them to not care if they put people in the street and if they make these negative cuts. I said, "You need to figure out a way to help the people that need help." I too said I didn't think it was right for her to point and call the person the name she called her. But I said, "You can't judge her. You've never been there." And I also said, "You're looking at her right now. I am also in the same position." They were shocked. I don't know why they were shocked. But I said that I could not understand that people in a position as yours would make a decision based on emotions. You're there to make competent decisions, not emotional ones. They asked me, "Can she be reached?" Because they were a little nervous. And I said, "Yes, you can talk to her," I said, "But she's pushed. You try to put yourself in a situation where you're going to be out in three months." I just wanted to get that out because there are so many stereotypes of the whole situation and it seems that there was no way for her to get her point across but to just blow up. They're not going to listen to her if she sat down there. I've seen her in action before. She's very astute, she's mannerable and everything else. But there was no way she could get that point across without acting like that. I think the stereotypes just camouflage the realities of the whole situation.

89. *Id.*
90. *Id.*
D. Early Warning Signs: Documenting the Damage of Welfare Cuts

HARTFORD COURANT, MARCH 26, 1996: The Connecticut Association for Human Services and the Connecticut Alliance for Basic Human Needs used a recent informal survey of 401 low-income people from across the state to support their argument that welfare reform has done more damage than good. The survey describes people's difficulty in coping with cuts in benefits—by letting bills go unpaid, borrowing money, turning to family and friends for help and relying more on soup kitchens.91

On March 21, 1996, State Senator Toni Harp (D-New Haven) and the Connecticut Alliance for Basic Human Needs (CABHN) hosted a press conference at the Capitol to release the results of an informal survey that CABHN conducted to document the effects of the harsh welfare cuts the Connecticut General Assembly passed the year before. Mothers for Justice brought a full-time student and AFDC recipient, Elizabeth, to speak about what she is facing due to the welfare cuts.

Although not a scientific survey, the CABHN study's results undermined negative stereotypes about welfare recipients and uncovered a number of troubling stop-gap measures that the poor are using to avoid complete destitution. Eighty-six percent of the survey respondents reported previous work experience, but this experience was often in low-paid service sector jobs.92 Respondents reported a number of different strategies for coping with the cuts: 45% had borrowed money; 36% had asked family and friends for assistance; 43% had given up necessities like school clothing, cleaning supplies, and personal hygiene products. Forty-nine percent of the AFDC families responding to the survey stated that they had let some of their bills go unpaid in order to make ends meet.93 Senator Harp concluded, "What we passed a year ago was not welfare reform but simply welfare cuts to fill a budget hole."94

After CABHN members and Senator Harp introduced the survey results, Elizabeth described how she'd been forced to return to welfare after working briefly because she had no reliable child care and transportation. She explained that she was trying to get an education to make a better life for herself and her son, but that her social worker had told her that she would no longer be eligible for child care and transportation if she stayed in school. "They're telling me to drop my dreams," Elizabeth said.

93. See id. at 2-3.
After Elizabeth spoke, journalists asked some questions, many of which were disturbingly ill-informed. One journalist queried, “You’re saying that you can be working and still be below the federal poverty level?” Another reporter questioning Elizabeth was unfamiliar with the Pell Grant, a common form of federal financial aid assisting working-class and low-income students alike. Until Gracie pointed out that “even students at Yale University receive Pell Grants,” it seemed that the journalist would have unjustly mischaracterized Elizabeth as a dependent member of the “underclass.”

GS to Elizabeth: What was the experience like of speaking at the press conference?

Elizabeth: It was really educational. It was an experience that I’m sure I’m not going to ever forget. It helped me to stand up for, learn how to stand up for my rights. And speak out against things that I don’t feel [are] right. Things that are going to affect my long-term future.

GS to Elizabeth: And how did you feel when some of the journalists asked questions that [indicated] that they didn’t understand what you were trying to say?

Elizabeth: Well, to be honest, I was nervous when I had to get up to the microphone. But when they asked me questions I was more relaxed. I feel that, hopefully, by me speaking to them, they will understand or get an insight and see, or try to see, what I’m trying to say or feel. This is a chance for the people, the African-American, the Latino, to wake up! That’s basically what they need, to wake up and stand up, just as I went up there. I’m only one voice. There’s many voices out there, and they need to get up and speak and stand for their rights. . . . [T]he education is out there. The papers is out there. Turn on the T.V. Pick up the newspaper and find out what is going on around you. We’re here, but we need to know, what is not just . . . across the street or in your block. You have to look at things world-wide. Find out what’s going on down at the White House. What’s going on down in Hartford. Educate. There’s a lot you may not understand, but you need to first try to make a step. So that’s basically it. If they read the newspaper, hopefully more people will get up here and do like the Mothers for Justice and stand for their rights. And make a difference. That’s what it’s all about. Making a difference. Helping each other. Coming together. Basically, coming together and saying “We’re not going to stand for this.”

96. Id.
IV. HELPING WOMEN DEFINE THEMSELVES

A. "You may shoot me with your words" 97

Mothers for Justice began working on this narrative project in order to counter negative media images of poor women 98 with women's own stories about their lives. I hoped to answer Lucie White's challenge to present "new, first person retellings of old stories . . . to answer 'culture of poverty' arguments with more powerful responses than changing the subject." 99

Mothers for Justice members and organizers have seen first-hand how the media can distort women's attempts to speak out against punitive cuts. One of the relatively more reticent residents of the CCA Shelter, a mom with young children, agreed to speak with a television reporter regarding the durational limits on AFDC. She spoke at length with the reporter and was filmed with her children. The result was a news story entitled something like "Welfare Mothers: Will They Turn to Crime?" Out of all the footage, the reporter used only a shot of the woman saying, "We'll do whatever it takes." Cheri was upset because the journalist framed the question to put these words in the woman's mouth. 100

As I worked with Mothers for Justice, I discovered for myself that MFJ members do not conform to the stereotype of the television-watching "welfare mother." They are active, ambitious, bright community leaders. MFJ members struggle to "define themselves," 101 despite ugly media stereotypes and negative public images of women on welfare.

GS to Cheri: Have you witnessed examples of times when you thought the media distorted something and it was contributing to a negative image of people on welfare?

Cheri: There was one article that happened just before I got here that Mothers for Justice was very unhappy with. They felt like they were misquoted and they felt like the whole thing was distorted. It was very hard to get people to participate in any media stuff for quite a while after. We haven't had any horrible experiences since then. We've certainly felt like they don't necessarily cover things the way that we would like them covered. There are some people who are clearly sympathetic and have done some really good pieces about the group and about issues that are important to the women relatively recently.

97. ANGELOU, supra note 1, at 8.
98. Fineman, supra note 12; Williams, supra note 12.
101. Patricia Hill Collins also describes black women's attempts to define themselves in the face of racial and gender oppression and media stereotypes. PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT 91-96 (1990).
GS to Kecia: How have you felt in this welfare reform debate about what people have been saying about people on assistance?

Kecia: Well, I totally disagree because if you look at it, I'm totally the opposite of whatever they're describing. I feel like I'm making a difference and I'm letting it show. I don't have to . . . [accept] their idea of what a welfare recipient means. I mean, they might try to go into these urban areas, these poor areas where everything is going down, and characterize every recipient as being like that. What about the ones who've been on and are working? Or those who are working part-time and receiving assistance part-time who are trying to make a difference? Why don't they picture that? . . . Yes, there are bad people. . . . Whether you're rich or poor, there's a bad side and there's a good side. I get up every morning. I go to school. I get my kids ready to go to school. I just don't sit around at home collecting taxpayers' money, as they would say. I've worked also before I even got to this point. I worked for five or six years. So it's just not only their money.

Sarah: [W]e're not sitting around watching soap operas as some of the politicians I've heard say. I watched a mock Republican primary on T.V. at a school in Connecticut . . . [a]nd there was a girl . . . she was probably no older than 20, 21, going on and on about how the system is rewarding women for acts of illegitimacy. . . . I'm sitting there looking at her thinking, "What do you know? Where have you been? Your parents are probably paying for you to go to school." . . . I just couldn't believe what was coming out of her mouth. It was really just incredibly ignorant. A lot of people feel that same way.

GS to Sharon: When you say "They're tired of paying taxes for people to sit home and watch T.V.," that's the idea people in government have about people on welfare. But is it true?

Sharon. No. . . . I always wanted to work, but couldn't cause I had kids. When you have kids it takes a lot away from you, stuff you want to do. If you wanted to work, or you wanted to go places, you couldn't because you didn't have anybody responsible enough to watch your kids. I tell everybody, the best thing to do is not to have kids.

B. "You may cut me with your eyes."¹⁰²

As I talked with MFJ members, I realized that the pain and isolation experienced by welfare recipients stem from more than media hyperbole and sensational statements by careless politicians. Much of the stigmatization is perpetuated by more fortunate people in the women's own communities.

¹⁰² ANGELOU, supra note 1, at 8.
Women of color who are receiving assistance experience the added stigma of racist stereotypes.

These negative experiences have such a debilitating effect on women's self-esteem and their efforts towards self-sufficiency that recent attempts to deter fraud through methods that further stigmatize recipients, such as fingerprinting and mandatory drug-testing, are counter-productive.

**GS to Kecia:** We've talked a lot in meetings about people feeling that other people look down on them because they're on the State. In fact, you were talking about that last night. Can you expand on that?

**Kecia:** If I was to go into a suburban area and I was to take out my ID or my check or something or I pull out my food stamps, I'd get a whole different reaction... Even if they accept the food stamps, I get a whole different reaction than I would if I was to go into an urban area. Sometimes it's very degrading when you go to cash a check or you go to cash your food stamps in a suburban area because you want to avoid the bank lines. When you get there you get a whole different reaction, just, "Hold on. Wait a minute." I mean, that kind of thing, it bothers you. It's not like you go looking for it, it's right there before your eyes. And that's the difference between the urban areas and the suburban areas. You're singled out when you go into the suburban areas. "Would you wait a minute, I got to go get my manager?" You don't have to do that in an urban area. Or cashing your checks or your stamps, you go into a bank that's in the outskirts area and you find, "Oh, we don't do stamps past two o'clock." ... I'm like, "Huh? Can you show me anything in small print that's saying you don't do [that]. ..." You feel bad, you've got to walk out of the bank in front of all these people, and everybody heard her say that. And you're feeling like this [small]. It's not that I'm embarrassed because I'm on the system, but it's because you feel just like this when everybody's looking at you. It's real bad, you know?

**Sarah:** I've been in emergency housing before... My children walked to school—three miles to school and home—because they didn't want anybody to know. They were embarrassed. It was degrading. It was very hard to hold your head up when you're on welfare. ... I think a lot of people out there who've never been here just assume that everybody's able-bodied, that we're all lazy, that we're all just sitting here waiting for this big, fat check to come in the mail. Let me tell you something, that's not a big fat check. We struggle.

---

103. For earlier examples of stigmatization of welfare recipients, see JOEL F. HANDLER, REFORMING THE POOR: WELFARE POLICY, FEDERALISM, AND MORALITY 33-37 (1972) (discussing methods of using moral stigma, such as "man-in-the-house" and "suitable home" rules, to deter the poor from applying for and staying on welfare). See also JOEL F. HANDLER & ELLEN J. HOLLINGSWORTH, THE "DESERVING POOR": A STUDY OF WELFARE ADMINISTRATION 165 (1971).

104. For a composite story, see Kelly, supra note 31.
GS to Karen: Have you experienced in your time on the State incidents when people made you feel like a second-class citizen?

Karen: I felt when I applied for Job Connection I was discriminated against. Why? Because my Job Connection worker told me that he didn't feel I was ready to enter college. And I felt that was discrimination because my work showed that I was ready to enter college. And I think he felt that because I had been out of the field so long, I wasn't ready for college. I didn't think that was his decision to make. His job was to help me if I do decide to go to school, not to tell me that I wouldn't make it in school.

Sarah: They've got that welfare check, dangling it on the end of a string like a carrot. "If you don't do this, you won't get this." That's not right either. They're making us grovel more than we already do. There's times when I walk into a grocery store, there's people behind me, and I get hot all over because I'm so ashamed I'm paying with food stamps. I watch out to make sure my sons' friends aren't in the store when I pay because I don't want anyone to know. You know, kids are cruel. And down here? This is a nice section. I'm lucky to be down here. Everybody down here is sort of well-off. . . . I mean, WaWa's is right over here. I never use food stamps over there.

GS to Nora: Where do you feel that this labelling is coming from? Is it from friends and neighbors that you know, or is it from the media?

Nora: Media. As far as some of the women that I call are well-off and not on the State, I once heard this woman say, "Those women are downtown today." I'm like, "Those women?" [the other woman responded] "State women." I feel like that's part of the anger that I hold inside. It's like a judgment attitude towards welfare recipient people. Lack of education, knowledge about what it's like to be on the other side. I mean, to make it short and sweet, when I was younger, I used to look at people who were on food stamps, and I used to be, "Oh yeah, I don't ever want to get on welfare." But I found out later I had to do the same thing. So I found out later I was just like those people, not even educated, didn't even understand the whole concept. And now I'm in that situation.

GS to Iva: We talked a little bit about stereotypes about people on assistance. Have you seen examples of times when you've observed people being stereotyped that way?

Iva: When I was not able to finish my schooling . . . I went to the President, the Dean, and I talked to her. She looked at my GPA and she said, "Oh that's a really good GPA." She was really upset about the situation but nothing came about. The reason why I went to her was because a Caucasian colleague of mine had went there two weeks before that and she got tremendous results. So that was flagrant. That's just something that we've become numb to.
Sometimes you become numb to it, you just kind of blow it off—whatever's available for you from within at that time.

Jennifer: [W]hen I was younger I was discouraged from going [to college] because I had a child. I wasn't as strong as I am now. It must have come from listening to everyone's opinion and drawing my own from it. I went to U. Conn., and they were like, "Oh no. You know, college campus is no place for you and your child nor [is] an off-campus apartment. . . ." If I was strong, I would have gone and done it anyway. They [school counselors] just threw a whole bunch of challenges in my face about how difficult it would be.

Nora: It's me and maybe four other women waiting at the bank one day. There was an older white gentleman standing behind us. So the bank teller says, "Excuse me, sir, next." And we're like, "Wait a minute. What about us?" [Bank teller:] "Well, are you cashing a check?" [Women:] "Yes, we are cashing a check." [Bank Teller:] "But it's a State check." And the old gentleman looks and he says, "No, they were first." And I said, "No she did not skip over us welfare people for this man who's cashing a check!" One of us could have been cashing a regular check. So I said, O.K., I'm gonna keep my cool. When I got up to the front, I said, "Excuse me, Miss, that was discrimination. You don't even know if we had a regular check in our pocketbook or not. Are you having a bad day? Or is there a problem with welfare people?" And she looked and she said, "No ma'am, I just assumed." [Nora:] "No, you assumed wrong. The next time I come in this bank, I'm gonna pull out my check and I'm gonna step in front of all these people, and see if you call me then." I said, "You were very out of place." The other women were very upset too. We could have reported the issue, but we just left it alone. From that day forward, that's another thing that raised my self-esteem about being on the welfare. I said, I'm not going to be ashamed. As long as I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing with my money and I'm taking care of my daughter, I'm not going to be ashamed any more about it. And I'm not. But that incident right there was like one of the stepping stones.

GS to Barbara: Do you know some stories about times when people [on assistance] were made to feel like second-class citizens?

Barbara: A friend of mine went down to GA to apply for assistance. All she wanted was medical. They said she could not apply for medical assistance because she made $2 more than the maximum amount they allow. Then the worker said, and I'm quoting, "You'd be better off if you had a child. Then we could help you or you could get help from the State." I thought that was demeaning, actually I thought it was ridiculous because she never had any cause to say anything like that. It was unprofessional of her.
GS to Marjory: What is the public missing in its image of public benefits recipients?

Marjory: Instead of seeing [welfare recipients] as people or human beings, I think they see them as animals. They look down on them instead of realizing they're people just like them. They have that discrimination, that prejudice. . . . I can't really say what they don't see. It's hard to think of people not wanting to care or feel for someone else. But I know they're missing something, it's a big chunk of whatever it is. They don't seem to get it and the higher they get the less they know. They need to keep in touch with a variety of people and not get caught in the web.

C. Direct Action in Response to Fingerprinting

CONNECTICUT POST, MARCH 2, 1996: Union leaders, political activists and welfare recipients Friday blasted a state mandate that welfare clients be fingerprinted in order to receive their checks. At a rally outside the city’s welfare office, about 50 people protested a policy they called “immoral” and “dehumanizing.” They said the $5.1 million used for the fingerprinting system could be better spent for job programs to get recipients off assistance. “It dehumanizes everyone,” State Sen. Toni Harp, D-New Haven, said. “It’s absolutely wrong. It’s morally corrupt, and we demand that it be stopped.”

NEW HAVEN REGISTER, MARCH 2, 1996: Opponents [of fingerprinting] say the new system treats people like criminals just because they’re poor. Gracie Brown, a former welfare mother who is now co-director of the Welfare Reform Project at Christian Community Action in New Haven, said fraud is far more rampant among health-care professionals who over-treat welfare recipients and overcharge the government for their care. “Why aren’t they going after the doctors and the hospitals, where the real fraud is?” Brown asked. “This is disguised to separate us from the rest of society.”

A striking example of recent stigmatization of the poor is the State of Connecticut’s new policy of fingerprinting all AFDC and GA recipients. Many Mothers for Justice members feel that they are being treated like criminals when they have done nothing wrong. In response to the State policy, MFJ conducted a postcard campaign and a direct action. Recipients, their friends,

---

neighbors, and supporters sent postcards emblazoned with thumbprints to the Governor and legislators protesting the policy.

Many members, however, felt that further, direct action was merited. Following the example of State Representative Christopher Donovan (D-Meriden), a group of Mothers for Justice and We the People (WtP) members, along with supporters from the community, assembled at the City Welfare Office on Friday, March 1, the morning that GA recipients were first fingerprinted. After speeches by State Senator Toni Harp (D-New Haven), labor officials, and MFJ and WtP organizers, demonstrators demanded to be fingerprinted along with the recipients. At that time, City Welfare officials maintained that the "digital imaging" machine was broken.\(^{107}\)

That afternoon, a smaller group of demonstrators returned to demand to be fingerprinted. This time, the City Welfare bureaucracy was more organized, and the Chief of Police was present. MFJ and WtP organizers were told that they had to apply for GA to be fingerprinted, and that they had to make an appointment with the Acting Director of City Welfare. He was not available.

Although this direct action did not halt New Haven's policy of fingerprinting GA recipients, it garnered some media attention, and allowed MFJ and WtP members to voice their outrage regarding the policy.

\textit{GS to Karen:} Can you tell me how you feel about the fingerprinting?

\textit{Karen:} I have never committed a crime. I have never been arrested. So I have never been fingerprinted. So why when I join the welfare system, do I have to be fingerprinted? I have always felt that fingerprinting was something for the law, for criminals. And if I've never committed a crime against the law, I shouldn't have to pay.

\textit{GS to Barbara:} What happened when you went down to the City Welfare for the fingerprinting?

\textit{Barbara:} First of all they said they didn't want to see us without an appointment. Then they said they didn't want to see us because we wasn't officially on GA. So I said, "Governor Rowland isn't on GA, how come he can get fingerprinted and we can't?"\(^{108}\) I said that if you're going to fingerprint him, you should be prepared to fingerprint everybody else. They said, they'd have to give us an appointment to see somebody to be fingerprinted. Chief [of Police] Pastore was there also and he said something to the effect of "Why are you here, why do you want to be fingerprinted?" We all said that we wanted to be fingerprinted to show, unity, solidarity, and as our form of a protest about the fingerprinting. Because I feel it's barbaric,


it’s ridiculous, and the next think you know they’ll be tattooing us like they did in the concentration camps.

GS to Nora: When you went for your [AFDC benefit] redetermination [meeting] recently, you got fingerprinted. How did you feel about that?

Nora: At first I felt like a criminal. At first I did. I felt just like the other women in my class did because it was a big issue in my classroom. All the women got into a big argument about the issue. . . . They felt it was discrimination. Why do welfare women have to be fingerprinted? You shouldn’t have to be fingerprinted for any other job, except for certain, specific jobs. So they felt really intimidated. They felt like this was unnecessary. . . . But I felt like, O.K., now I’m here, I’m on the system. Now I have to do what it takes. As long as I’m not doing anything illegal, fine, I’ll deal with it. I really thought it was hilarious because when I went in, the only thing they did was my two index fingers. So I was sitting there laughing, and I was saying “Is this it?” So, after that, I don’t feel any different now. It’s like, O.K., something that’s done. I’m not doing anything illegal, so no big deal.

GS to Cheri: I know you do some media work and also some direct actions. How do you decide to do those, and what is your strategy?

Cheri: Sometimes we decide to do [direct actions] because something just pisses us off so badly so we feel like we can’t let it go by. The best actions are the ones that come out of a group decision and a feeling in the group that something is really important to address and the best way to address it is by doing something public. Those are the best actions and those are the ones that people feel the best about even if we don’t get the most response.

D. Thanking an Ally: Valentine’s Day Awards Dinner

CONNECTICUT POST, MARCH 2, 1996: Former City Welfare Director Debbie Shapiro joined the unemployed last month, when she said she quit her job in large part because of the state’s fingerprinting policy. “I’m very offended by it, and I couldn’t do it,” Shapiro said.109

In February, Mothers for Justice members found an ally in City Welfare Director Debbie Shapiro. Shapiro resigned her job to protest the cuts to General Assistance and the fingerprinting of GA recipients. To honor her, MFJ members hosted a Valentine’s Day Awards Dinner at the Broadway Community Soup Kitchen. In his keynote speech at the dinner, Tere Davis of We the People said that if he and his friends were rich, they would have hired

Mothers for Justice

out the Sheraton and invited Whoopi Goldberg to present the award, but the Community Soup Kitchen was the very best MFJ and WtP had to offer.  

In accepting the award, Debbie explained the process through which she'd realized that she had to resign for reasons of principle. She recounted an incident she had witnessed twenty-five years ago in Providence, RI. “One early weekend morning I passed by a doorway of a storefront in Providence where a man had been sleeping,” she said. “A police officer was kicking him to get him up.” Remembering that image, Shapiro said that she resigned from her job rather than kick poor people when they are down by implementing Connecticut’s welfare cuts.

In her acceptance speech, Debbie described the “myth-making” of “welfare reform”:

There has been this kind of abuse of the truth, and I have been disturbed emotionally by it. If you think about most of the general public, we are all vulnerable. None of us have a tremendous amount of real security. If we fall, our survival is threatened. Underneath the ideological rhetoric, myth-making, and political pandering is fear, insecurity, and anger. These emotions allow us to ignore facts and figures. These emotions allow us to focus on other people’s behavior and not on our own. These emotions allow us to remain blind to the real problems of our economy and our society. Those of us in power can therefore abuse our power, by creating and implementing laws which don’t actually address the real problems.

V. PERSONAL CHALLENGES FOR PHENOMENAL WOMEN

She stands
before the abortion clinic,
confounded by the lack of choices.
In the Welfare line,
reduced to the pity of handouts.
Ordained in the pulpit, shielded
by the mysteries.
In the operating room,
husbanding life.
In the choir loft,
holding God in her throat.
On lonely street corners,
hawking her body.
In the classroom, loving the
children to understanding.\textsuperscript{112}

A. Working for a Living

\textsc{Hartford Courant, February 15, 1996}: Setting the stage for an
election-year showdown, a coalition of labor, community and religious
groups kicked off a campaign Wednesday to raise the state’s minimum
wage to $6.06 an hour—a $1.79-an-hour increase.\textsuperscript{113}

In light of their meager household budgets and the stigma attached to
receiving public benefits, it is unsurprising that Mothers for Justice members
would rather work in the paid labor force than receive welfare. Many Mothers
for Justice members have long employment histories. All hope for stable jobs
that provide a decent wage and medical benefits.

\textit{Lorraine}: I’ve been working all my life. I started out cleaning houses. There
was an agency that you would go to and they would take you to the place
where you were supposed to work that day. They would come back and pick
you up. The people paid them, and they paid you. They got more than twenty
dollars, but we only got $20 a day. I worked in housekeeping for a long time.
Then eventually I did the motels out on the beach. After that, I worked in
factories doing piecework. . . . After that, I got into the nursing home. And
I worked in the laundry. But I got interested in nursing after one time that I

\textsuperscript{112} \textsc{Maya Angelou, Our Grandmothers, in Four Poems Celebrating Women, supra note 1, at 15, 21.}

\textsuperscript{113} \textsc{Andrew Julien, Coalition Campaigning for Higher Minimum Wage, Hartford Courant, Feb. 15, 1996, at F1.}
Mothers for Justice went back home. My mother she was overseer over a boarding house, but it was a place for handicapped people. ... [S]he kept us there with her.

**GS to Sharon:** What are some of the things that make it hard to find a job?

**Sharon:** For one, there's not that many jobs out there. I could basically do any kind of work if it had to do with lifting. Because that's all I did all my life. ... [But] there's no jobs out there. Working in Burger King and McDonald's, you can get a job, but it's not enough money to take care of you and three kids. Down South I used to lift boxes and stuff. I worked in American Linen on the machines, folding towels. Holiday Inn, I was like a housekeeper, I did rooms. Working with the elderly, I would go to their homes, fix them breakfast and wash them up and sit with them. But like I said, we didn't have to go to school to do that. Now you have to get a license and stuff like that.

**GS to Kecia:** What would it take to make your family reasonably secure so that you would never have to go back on State again?

**Kecia:** I think that job security is another thing that is important. You don't just want to go and get a job at McDonald's or Stop-n-Shop, knowing that you have three kids, and knowing that you have to pay rent and your children's medical, and knowing that you have to pay bills. So I think that job security and job stability are definitely a must in my concerns and the way that I would look at things for my future.

**Jennifer:** They [legislators] want you to get a job. You can't get a job unless you have a phone. ... I was assistant manager and I remember looking at applications and hearing what they [the employer] had to say and knowing what they were looking for. They really don't want somebody that they have to call Susie Ann upstairs to tell Susie Mae downstairs to go across the street and tell Lou to come to work. ... A basic phone. Not the long-distance calling, not even the total phone, but just a basic phone—nothing more than 20 odd dollars a month is what welfare recipients need. It's easier when you go for a job, to have a phone and a car. If you have a phone and a car, Lord have mercy, you're gone! You can get any job. Even if you have no experience, they will pull you over the person that doesn't have a phone that does have experience. Because, they can train you. But they can't get the person who has experience but no phone and transportation.

**GS to Nora:** What has the experience of job-searching in New Haven been like?

**Nora:** It's been tough for me. I have certain skills, but then I lack others. So I have to try to find out what is needed in order to get the jobs that I want, or I have to go back to school to get the needed qualifications and credentials.
GS to Nora: What are some of the factors that are making your job search difficult?
Nora: One, it seems like a lot of jobs are being cut. . . . Those are the main things that make it hard for me. I feel like I need hands-on experience type of skills, being able to go out and do the type of jobs I want. That's what I've been doing, trying to volunteer, so that when a job comes up and I do get the conditions I need I'll know what I need to do.

GS to Nora: What kinds of jobs are you looking for?
Nora: I'd love to teach anything dealing with outreach work. . . . [I've worked in] the public school system, substituting, coordinating programs, after school programs. I've worked in daycare centers. I do my own volunteer daycare center in my own home. I also tutor kids.

B. Parenting: Both Challenge and Source of Strength

Despite the name, not all Mothers for Justice members are parents. A substantial majority, however, do have children. MFJ members have different feelings about how parenthood has affected their lives. Some members emphasize that motherhood has hindered them in their attempts to support themselves through working: they point to problems in finding child care and obtaining adequate food and medical care for their children. Other MFJ mothers focus on how their children have supported them through their troubles. Some MFJ members discuss the challenges of raising healthy children in an environment poisoned by poverty and racism. Marita Golden writes of some of these dangers:

As the mother of a black son, I have raised my child with a trembling hand that clutches and leads. . . . I dream . . . of my son slaying the statistics that threaten to ensnare and cripple him, statistics that I know are a commentary on the odds for my son, who isn't dead or in jail. And though I have paved a straight and narrow path for my son to tread, always there is the fear that he will make a fatal detour.114

Like Golden, some MFJ members speak of conscious strategies they employ to keep their children safe on the narrow path through adolescence.

GS to Sharon: Did you start having babies in the 70s?
Sharon: I had my first in '71, February 27, 1971. I wish I'd had none. I told my mother, there was a lot of stuff you didn’t tell me when I was coming up

114. MARITA GOLDEN, SAVING OUR SONS: RAISING BLACK CHILDREN IN A TURBULENT WORLD 7 (1995).
about the birds and the bees. Because if she had, I don’t think I would have had kids. It’s hard raising them. And it’s expensive. And there’s stuff you can’t afford to get them. . . . I wouldn’t have had any kids if I’d known then what I know now. I would’ve had a job. I’d probably know how to drive. I ain’t gonna say I would be married, but I would’ve had a nice place and I might’ve been able to do all the things that I wish I’d a done like typing, take up Spanish and stuff like that at school. . . . I think my life would have been better.

GS to Jennifer: How old is your son?
Jennifer: [My son] is thirteen. I had him when I was fourteen years old. He is, hold up, I’m about to get teary, he is my everything. He’s my reason for anything good that happened in life. He’s it. . . . When I was going through all that surgery, Lord have mercy! I couldn’t see any reason for living. IV’s backing up and I’m terrified of needles. . . . I was in the hospital for like three weeks. . . . But when my son was there [visiting], I never wanted to let him see me down. I always wanted him to see me strong. I thought that was important. I’m a single parent, so I’m gonna have to be mom and dad. Mommy gotta give him love; daddy gotta have to be strong. So that’s what I did. I gave him strong love. They [nurses] came in, they had to take care of my I.V. And they were like, “Oh my God, here goes the wimp.” And they pushed the fluid to stop the clogging and I was just like [impassive]. . . . I didn’t want my son to know how bad I really was. So it was like, “Come on. Let’s go down to the cafeteria. I’ll get you something to eat.” And I get up out of bed and I go for a walk. My son pushing me around in the wheelchair when I was too tired to walk. When he was there, I pulled my ass together for him. And I made it through that. I still had [medical] problems after that. . . . But I always had a strong face for my baby. For the longest time, I could not see any reason to live besides for my son. I was striving just for my son. That was it. And he pulled me through. For the first time, I have this phrase I’ve been saying, and I realize where it came from. I got my bills underhand where they’re not killing me, but I can now stomp them out. And I said, “And life is good.” And it’s true. I never thought those words would come out of my mouth again. My son pulled me through the darkness to this point where I can say again, “Life is good.” There is something to this thing called life.

GS to Kecia: Do you think there are risks and pitfalls in your neighborhood that kids can fall into?
Kecia: [S]ince I am in the neighborhood that I am at, that’s just the more reason that I push to have my kids in different schools. My kids are involved in different curricular things after school. . . . [B]ecause I see the area, the community, and I see a lot of wasted talent . . . and my child is not exempt
either. But by me pushing . . . I drive it into them, "You're going to be something. You're going to have something in life." And I know that you cannot just talk to a child, you have to put some action behind it. Having these curriculums for your child to be involved in, that keeps them from being so idle out in the world. A friend calls up and says, "Hey let's do this." And your child says, "No I can't, I've got to go to practice today. I've got to go to baseball. I've gotta go to dancing classes." You've got something to do because your mother's paying for it biweekly or monthly, so you don't have a choice but to go. . . . They don't understand that it's bad or that they can be involved in the wrong thing unintentionally. But it only takes that one friend.

Jennifer: [M]y son's now at that point where—I mean, I intentionally kept him in the house. You know, these parents are talking about they don't like the couch potatoes and so on, but having a couch potato means that that child is not outside doing drugs. Means that that child is not outside in a gang. You might have, and actually, watching television isn't that bad when you teach your child to also enjoy Nova and the educational channels. My son will sit and watch cartoons, but my son also likes to watch Nova. . . . I intentionally kept my son in the house to be a couch potato. Now he's at the point where he's going outside. And this is where I have to sit back and cross my fingers and say, "I hope all the learning that I've been teaching him, and all the knowledge that I've been pumping into his head goes to work!" It's all I can do right now. You gotta teach him to use his own brain. I've learned that the words "Do as I say not as I do" doesn't apply to kids. They do what they see their parents do. So if you have bad habits you can trust your child will too. The best upbringing that I've given my son was me as an example. My son thought I was just that fantastic. When he was growing up, I was his everything. He'd tell all the kids on the block, "Oh, my mom can fix this. I can fix that." My mother taught me to be independent and to fix things by myself. I know how to work on my own car. I know how to do enough plumbing to get myself through. I can put a door up, whatever. And my son is also taught the same thing. Do what you've got to do. Don't wait for other people to do it for you. . . . Everything I'm doing has the end result to make up a beautiful grown man. . . . I didn't want him to grow up, have an apartment, and eat at McDonald's all the time. . . . My son can make a pot roast, with potatoes and steamed broccoli. He can make string beans that'll make you cry, they're so good. He knows how to make lo-cal things. I've taught him about seasoning and proper cooking and so on. My son can make breakfast, lunch, and dinner so good you wouldn't believe a child made it. And this is part of my "get him ready for manhood."
C. Oppression: Race, Gender and Class

U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, MARCH 28, 1994: [W]omen in minority groups; women in “traditional” women’s jobs; women who stay at home to raise children; elderly, rural, some poor and younger women—acknowledge their debt to feminism’s early battles. But they charge that the feminist movement has failed to broaden its base and remains made up largely of white, highly educated women who have not adequately addressed the issues that matter to them: child care rather than lesbian and abortion rights, economic survival rather than political equality, the sticky floor rather than the glass ceiling.\textsuperscript{115}

Although a majority of the members of Mothers for Justice are African-American women, MFJ is by choice a racially integrated group. At the first MFJ meeting I attended, Kecia presented the group with a dilemma: an African-American women’s organization had invited her to participate in a Women’s Month project scheduled for March. She was concerned, however, that participating in an event sponsored by and for all-black organizations might compromise MFJ’s integrated image. The group decided that Kecia could participate as a representative of MFJ, provided that the coalition understood that Mothers for Justice is integrated by choice.\textsuperscript{116}

Although many MFJ members do not define themselves as feminists, MFJ’s goal is to empower poor women. An MFJ member distributed the above excerpted article on women of color and feminism, \textit{Separating the Sisters}, at the February 9, 1996, Mothers for Justice meeting. Gracie often says that dynamics of race and class create a double standard with respect to women’s roles.\textsuperscript{117} While white, middle-class women are encouraged to stay at home with their children, legislators require poor women to take jobs outside the home when their children are still very small. Gracie believes this contradiction sends a message about whose children are more important.

Grassroots groups’ unique location at the interstices of race, gender and class position such organizations to be motors of genuine empowerment for all women. \textit{Separating the Sisters} concludes:

\textsuperscript{115} Monika Guttman et al., \textit{Separating the Sisters}, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Mar. 28, 1994, at 49.


\textsuperscript{117} It is not within the scope of this paper to do an extended theoretical analysis of the nature of compound identities and the intersectionality of race and gender. I recognize the importance of these issues because of the groundbreaking work of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, among others. See COLLINS, supra note 101; \textsc{bell hooks}, Feminist Theory from Margin to Center (1984); \textsc{bell hooks}, Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women & Feminism (1981); \textsc{Audre Lorde}, Sister Outsider (1984); \textsc{Skin Deep}: Black Women & White Women Write About Race (Marita Golden & Susan Richards Shreve eds., 1995); \textsc{Alice Walker}, In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983).
Grass-roots women’s groups hope to produce a “fourth wave” of the American feminist movement that would embrace everyone from Hillary Rodham Clinton to Annie Williams, 37, a former welfare mother in Atlanta who now holds a $20,000-a-year job at the Black Women’s Wellness Center . . . “Until I got with this empowerment group,” [says Williams], “I didn’t even know you could do such a thing.”

Similarly, Mothers for Justice focuses on self-sufficiency, self-esteem, and empowerment for poor women without embracing a self-consciously “feminist” agenda.

GS to Nora: Who are some people you admire?  
Nora: [I admire] Harriet Tubman. Because Harriet Tubman was very powerful, very smart. Even though as a black woman she was held down, she didn’t let that keep her in that situation. She learned how to get around it. I feel like Harriet Tubman in a sense, being enslaved and trying to figure out a way to get out of it.

GS to Elizabeth: I know you’re involved with the African-American history society at Gateway Community and Technical College. What attracts you to that and what are you doing?  
Elizabeth: Basically . . . we’re trying to stand for our rights on the college campus. To set in place things for the minorities on campus. We’re trying to set up scholarship funds for people that can’t afford to go to school. We’re trying to put more classes that’s involving the history, our history, knowing our history, knowing where we came from, and knowing what we need to do to get where we need to get to. So that’s basically what the club is about is enlightening the African-American people and the minorities to what’s going on, what happened in the past. [If] you don’t know the past, you basically won’t know the future. You need to know what happened in the past in order to strive to the future. If you don’t know the cause—you have to know the cause. And that’s basically what the club is about. Enlightening and educating the minority people to what happened and things like that.

GS to Marjory: What has Mothers for Justice done for you?  
Marjory: I think Mothers for Justice has given me a little political insight. I’m not really politically inclined or whatever. I kind of think things are already set into motion. [I’m] kind of one of those that say, “I don’t see anything change.” [W]ay back when they got rid of the [chattel slavery] law to take away slavery [it] didn’t necessarily change everyone’s views just because it was a law. And a lot of people are still prejudiced . . . . They made a law but

118. Guttman et al., supra note 115, at 49.
a lot of people didn't go for it. They still have their own values. So the whole political system, I don't really understand it, except for it seems like who you know and money. . . . It's like if you know this person, it works. If you have enough money, then it works. But other than that, the real needs and the morality of it and your values and all of that good stuff just goes right out the window.

D. Physical and Sexual Abuse

TIME, APRIL 3, 1995: [A]buse at any point in a woman's life appears to increase the odds for future welfare enrollment. A recent study by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy found that 60% of women on public assistance had experienced some form of abuse, physical or sexual, as adults. Abuse experienced in childhood was, if anything, even more damaging—predisposing girls to early sexual activity, teenage motherhood and, again, the eventual need for welfare.119

In her previous job, Mothers for Justice organizer Cheri Quickmire worked as an advocate for children in a battered women's shelter. She still conducts training sessions on domestic violence for local shelters. In March, 1996, as part of New Haven's "Sister City" project, she accompanied a group of therapists to Managua, Nicaragua, to conduct workshops on domestic violence. Her experience in this area has made her aware of the interrelationship between physical abuse and women's dependency on welfare.

Abusive relationships can force women out of their homes and onto the welfare rolls. Psychological problems stemming from rape and incest may cause problems for women at school or work, making it difficult for them to maintain economic self-sufficiency.120 “Abuse, even of the verbal kind, saps self-esteem,” writes Barbara Ehrenreich, and “physical abuse can imprison a woman at home, too ashamed to show up for work with a black eye or cigarette burns.”121

By the same token, the threat of welfare cuts may lock women into abusive relationships because they have no other way to care for their families. As Ehrenreich explains,

Welfare can and sometimes does free women from dependency on predatory males. . . . But welfare benefits have been shrinking for two decades, to a level—a little less than $400 a month per family, on

120. Id.
121. Id.
average—that forces many recipients into financial reliance on any man who can help pay for the groceries. This, according to the researchers, is why one recent study found that 58% of the women enrolled in a Chicago welfare-to-work-training program were current victims of domestic violence.\footnote{122. Id. See also White, supra note 99, at 1983-89.}

A number of women in Mothers for Justice have survived domestic violence, rape, and incest, and the group sometimes provides a safe place where women can talk about their experiences.

Laura: I'm very nervous and very scared about what's going to happen with my children and daycare. If I'm going to go to work, who's going to watch my kids? I'm a survivor of incest in my family. . . . I have anxiety attacks when my kids are in daycare, not in Gateway, but if I've had to leave them even with relatives. I just get overwhelmed. I go to support groups, meetings, for it, but still I'm very phobic about who has care of my children. . . . I just don't have a lot of trust in people that I don't know, and also in people that I do know. . . . I have to catch myself even when I leave them with their brothers and their brothers have friends over. If I run to the store for a half hour, I find myself leaving the store and not finishing what I'm doing. . . . It's a real issue with a lot of women and men, although a lot of them won't say . . . because they're embarrassed or ashamed. They won't speak up and say.

Kay: [I] had a family member that forced himself on me. Not only was there an incest case with me with another family member, there was also rape. I was also raped. Those things that happened to me, I blocked them out until this [recent crisis] that happened. . . . These doors opened up and I started seeing my life coming back before me. I started saying, “Well, I caused this. . . . If it hadn't been for me, this wouldn't have happened.” And all I wanted to do was just end everything. I was highly suicidal. . . . So I started outpatient therapy. . . . And November, 1989, I called [the therapist] and I told her, “Look, someone has got to come and pick me up because if I walk out . . . today I'm going to end it all.” All I could see was just me walking out [the] doors and walking right straight in front of any high-speed car, truck, anything it was I was going to put myself in front of it and end it all. But I guess there was still something good deep down inside me that gave me the strength to make that phone call. So that put me as an in-patient. And it did help me . . . and so I came through that, the suicidal part, and I came out. I thank God for that. Taking my life was not the way. . . . I would never go that road again. Because my children mean more to me . . . if I take my life from them, what have they got? They need me in times of crisis. They need me to help
show them the way to go. Because of the hard times and troubles that I've been through I can guide them a whole lot better than another person can.

*Tina:* I was molested when I was in [my childhood home]. I was molested several times by two different people. This is why I love the weather [there], but I really don't ever want to live there. But this is also the reason why I have a very tight relationship with my son. I told my son a long, long, long time ago when he was still learning how to talk, “Mommy loves you. And there is nothing on the face of this earth that could ever happen, or that somebody could ever do to you, or that you could ever do that would stop me from loving you. Period.” . . . I also realized that children who keep to themselves are the ones that they prey on. I look at myself and I remember what made them prey on me. You don't have friends and so on. Being articulate, being outspoken, shies them away from you. There's no doubt that child [my son] is outspoken and so on and so on. I did have a situation where someone tried to take that extra step and tried to get really close to my son in that way. I feel so bad, because of what I went through I still have my fears, and I didn't confront him myself. But my boyfriend at the time took care of the situation. . . . [I]’ve been self-healing myself. The first thing is to admit what happened. And I bring it up in certain conversations, and I was surprised how many people were like, “Yeah. Me too.” And that would be the first time that we had ever spoken. A lot of times, by being the first person to speak about molestation, you’re making someone else feel a little more at ease about talking about or accepting what they have been through. I made a tape. I sat in my room, I turned off the lights cause I couldn’t stand to see myself. And I made a tape. I went in detail of what happened. That was the first true step. To actually say it. I tried to play the tape back. I couldn’t.

**E. Phenomenal Women: Gaining Self-Esteem**

Mothers for Justice members report that lack of self-esteem was one important factor that kept them from pursuing education and careers leading to economic self-sufficiency. They identify family relationships, particularly relationships with mothers, as key to developing healthy self-esteem in children. Friends and family, MFJ members often say, provide the most important source of emotional support for women’s transition from welfare to work.

Women who do not have a particularly strong family network, however, report that they can find this same support within the group. In fact, even women who enjoy good relationships with family and friends identify their involvement in Mothers for Justice as an important step in the development of their self-esteem. Women often say that learning leadership and speaking
skills and gaining insight into the political process increased their feelings of self-worth.

Sarah: I think that a lot of men and women who end up on welfare long-term don't have the direction as children and don't have a lot of support from their parents. Have no self-worth because they were abused as children. And this is just where a lot of us end up because we don't have the self-confidence to go out and say "I deserve better." Or we don't have the self-confidence to stand on our own two feet because we've been told, "No, you can't. You're worthless." I think a lot of women, not myself, are going to end up in abusive, bad relationships because they are going to have to depend on somebody else's income. I've seen this happen. Where they'll let their children be abused; they'll let themselves be abused, because they can't support themselves. That's what it's come down to.

Lorraine: My instructors were constantly on me. They wanted me to . . . further my education. They said that I was doctor material. . . . I didn't see it.

GS to Lorraine: Why didn't you?
Lorraine: Because I didn't have the confidence in myself that these people, that they saw. I lacked self-confidence. It took me a long time to learn it. Just recently I've been believing more in myself. Because I had a lot of negative that was put out to me, like "You're not going to be anything. You're no good." Stuff like that. People say, the way you label your child, that's the way your child will grow up. . . . It's really true. And I catch myself sometime with my children. When I'm about to say something to them I've got to stop. Because I don't want to label them. And I stop and I tell them, "You can be anything you want to be. Whatever you do, you do it good. I'll still be proud of you. No matter what." I was never taught self-confidence, so I had to learn it on my own. I had to grab it on my own.

GS to Sharon: Who are some people you admire?
Sharon: I admire everybody here at CCA cause they help me out a lot. They help me out like apartment hunting, being able to go out and find a job. Because I said, "I can't do that. I can't find no job." So, you gotta have self-esteem. Cheri, she'll talk to me. After that, I was able to go out and do a lot of things. I'm learning. Cause I've never talked . . . to people about problems or if I needed help with something. I wasn't able to do that. I mostly stayed to myself.

GS to Karen: What are some of the things you get from Mothers for Justice?
Karen: My self-esteem has really risen more now that I'm with Mothers for Justice. . . . Physically, it's done a lot for me because there's been times such
as Christmas when I've not been able to do certain things, and the group has been there for me. Financially, they've helped me. Just about every way I could imagine, Mothers for Justice has really been a great support for me.

GS to Gracie: Was [your return to school] around the same time you became involved in Mothers for Justice?

Gracie: The group was one of my supportive services. I had Krista and I had Bonita and Kecia, who were always saying, “Well, go ahead!” Always being supportive, making me [feel] like I could do it. Even though you know that, it doesn’t hurt to have someone in the background saying, “How was your day at school?” . . . It was just great for me. I think it is important to have those kind of things. I take my experiences, stuff that helped me, when I do this Aid to Education program. I do talk to the women and I tell them, over and over again, . . . “Well, I can be supportive.” You say it over and over again. . . . There was one woman last semester, . . . she called me and she confided in me about this problem she was having, totally unrelated to school, but it was affecting her schooling. This is the type of support I want to be. I don’t want to give you financial support and send you on your way. Because for me, I don’t think that’s enough. I do not think that’s enough to give people financial help and say, “Go do it,” because to me it just does not work. . . . To me it just does not work to say, “Get out there and do what you have to do. Come see me when you’ve finished and report back to me.” Because to me it takes that human face off it, and I don’t think you can do that.

VI. First To Be Counted

A. Leadership from Within Mothers for Justice

Mothers for Justice members and organizers all feel that leadership by officers elected from within the group is essential. Leadership in a grassroots organization, they agree, is most effective when it is provided by individuals who have lived through the challenges that new members currently face. Members from the group serve as role models. Eventually, they may make Gracie’s transition to acting as organizers, who facilitate other’s participation, rather than speaking out as individuals.123

GS to Kecia: What do you think in your life influenced you and made you interested in becoming a community leader?

123. Case studies suggest that leadership in welfare rights organizations can help public benefits recipients to economic self-sufficiency. See JACQUELINE POPE, BITING THE HAND THAT FEEDS THEM: ORGANIZING WOMEN ON WELFARE AT THE GRASS ROOTS LEVEL 133 (1989) (“Most of the former leaders [of the Brooklyn Welfare Action Council of the 1960s] have left the welfare rolls. Of the 17 leaders interviewed, 15 are no longer receiving public assistance. All returned to and completed high school. Four now have college credits, and two have their master of arts degrees.”).
Kecia: I just love helping people. Anything with helping everyone. I wasn't aimed at being a community leader. I was a shy person. I just sat back and listened and observed. But when you get hit in the face with blows! . . . And I say blows, because this is my life! . . . I think, being a leader, you have to be concerned with others, but I also think you have to be concerned with what you want out of life too. You have to be headstrong, and you have to know, "Well, this is what I want." Because that's an example for anyone else you're trying to capture. Because you want them to know, "That's what I want out of life, and I'm in your circumstance. I'm in your situation." I'm a person who came from out here, who's still midway (I'm trying to get there, but I'm midway), who can go back and pull somebody the way I was or worse and help them. I can pull the rope and say, "Come in. Come on in." I can pull the rope and let them see, I was there. I know. Sometimes experience is a good teacher, because it helps you correlate with other people in those circumstances and those dilemmas. And you can help them understand. I was there. I slept outside; I've done that. I was on welfare. You want to be able to reach them. And sometimes they can't be reached by authorities in high places because they feel they're gonna do what they wanna do. They just turn away and let it happen to them because they don't know that they can make a difference. Being a leader, you have to be motivated to help others, you have to be motivated to strive, to do the things that you want to do in life so that others can see, so that they can make a difference. Because a lot of people, they've seen where I've come from, and it's helped them say, "Well, maybe I'll come to the meetings." So it takes a little encouraging, takes a little pushing, sometimes it's frustrating. It's not easy being a leader because you've got to take it from all sides. But you have to stand. And that's what I'm learning. I'm not a person that you can easily hit and just fall out either.

Jennifer: I sat down, and I spoke with [former MFJ organizer Krista] and told her that I felt that if I took the backseat a little more, that everyone else would take the spotlight. And that there was a whole lot of potential there. It was really just a lack of confidence. . . . It's easy [for them] to sit back and let somebody else shine. It was very big and warm-hearted of them to let somebody else shine in their place and not have any bad feelings toward that person. That was beautiful. But, it was also a cop out—them letting me take the spotlight. So I stepped out of the spotlight. Gracie and Kecia just blossomed [after that]. I don't know if they can see it. But being an outsider looking in, which was the position that I took, they shine!

GS to Gracie: Why do you think you always wanted to do this kind of [speak out] thing?
Gracie: I don't know. I think I want to be more in the background because I don't care too much for public speaking out, although I will do it when I
Mothers for Justice have to. I don’t want to say that I really don’t like to. But I prefer to get people motivated or get other people to speak out about these issues and certainly if my story will help someone see what we’re doing better I don’t mind telling it. But after a while, cause I’ve told my story so many times, I want someone else’s; I want a new take on it. . . . In my opinion, one of the stronger things the group has done was to take on officers and to have leadership in the group, right within the group. It’s nice to have what was then Krista, what is now Cheri’s and my position as organizer, but it’s nice to have that leadership within the group. I think it’s nice to have leadership within the group where someone who is coming new into the group can look to and identify this as being part of the leadership of the group. . . . I think in order for a person to be leadership in the group you have to be a team player . . . You have to have this genuine respect for the group and for what we stand for and not be in the group for what you can get out of the group, but for what you can bring to the group.

GS to Cheri: How do you reach out to the current Mothers for Justice members?
Cheri: [W]e go and we try to meet with people at Gateway when they're between classes on their lunchtime. We do a lot of phone-calling. We call people at night a lot when we know they’ll be home with their kids. We have instituted two meetings a month. We used to meet once a month and have an officers’ meeting once a month, but we’re now having two group meetings a month so we can have one in the evening for women who are in school or who have gone back to work. We also have an officers’ meeting. The officers’ meetings usually happen in a restaurant. That seems to be the best way to get people to come out. We always have food at the meetings, child care at the meetings.

B. Organizing Mothers for Justice

Although Cheri and Gracie work together as partners, they came to their role as organizers via different paths. While Gracie “graduated” from Mothers for Justice to become a paid organizer, Cheri transferred laterally from another advocacy position. The two women’s different perspectives enable them to perform complementary tasks. Since Gracie was once a welfare recipient, she is a role model for women in the group and can counsel them based on her own experience. Cheri, on the other hand, is at ease negotiating the world of the Legislative Office Building and speaking informally with lobbyists and legislators.

One concern for MFJ organizers, Cheri says, is the tension between their philosophy of being non-directive and the necessity of reacting quickly to legislative proposals. Ideally, the organizers would like to rely as much as
possible on group decision-making and elected leadership. The fast pace of events at the Capitol, however, often leaves Gracie and Cheri with little more than forty-eight hours to organize some type of response. In such a pressured and under-funded situation, it is difficult to engage in in-depth dialogue and consensus-building.

**GS to Gracie:** How is your role different now that you're an organizer?

**Gracie:** I don't see [organizing] as a real big difference, other than I'm getting paid. Someone asked me before, what do you have to do to be an organizer. I didn't even know I was doing it. This is the title they put on what I was doing but I didn't know that's what I was doing. It was just something I did. And so it was, "You're an organizer, you organize." So I didn't know that that's what it was called.

**GS to Cheri:** How do you decide to do direct actions, what is your strategy?

**Cheri:** Because of the time constraints around decisions that are being made on people's lives, we don't always have the luxury of having long, heartfelt discussions about what would be the best way to respond to this, unfortunately. But my philosophy is not of organizers who come in and say, "We need to have an action on this." I won't feel good about that for the most part. I won't encourage that. But certainly we do that because otherwise there's just not time for people to respond. The people that we're working with just have so many stresses on their lives and so many commitments and so much that they have to deal with. . . . There's tension between us feeling like we have to do the directive stuff with the group, like we have to make things happen in a time frame that the group can't be on, that we have to do more directive organizing than I feel comfortable with. That's been a hard thing for me because that's just not my style. But it also confirmed a lot of what I already knew about organizing people with no resources. That it's practically impossible. You have to drive around and pick people up and get babysitters and try to make meetings happen at bizarre hours. It's not an easy task to facilitate people's participation on these issues, even if they're issues that are critical to people's lives.

**GS to Cheri:** How do you preserve the integrity of the group and the participative process [even with these time constraints]?

**Cheri:** It's really hard. I don't have an answer. . . . It's also the reality that the job that Gracie and I share is one job and we really need more people. I would ideally like to see more money for women in the group to do more organizing and to participate in the way that the Warriors [for Real Welfare Reform] have gotten money from the Presbyterian Church. Luz [Warriors organizer] and two other women have a stipend that they are getting now. It's better than nothing if you can't get a full-time position.
C. Community Leadership

With their increased self-esteem, new leadership skills, and broader social network, Mothers for Justice members often become leaders in the larger community. Many MFJ members are active in their children's schools and in efforts to develop better programs for youth. Others serve as a conduit of political and practical information, a resource for fellow students and co-workers. In this way, Mothers for Justice constitutes the epicenter of a larger grassroots movement, sending ripples of activism throughout the community.

Jennifer: A real community! That's such a beautiful phrase when you think of what it's supposed to mean. Community is support. Community is family. Community is always there. Community will take that person that they seen around, who was doing good but now is known to spend up all her money because she's got a drug problem and come to her and say, "Look, we gotta get you together." You know? The old way. Not letting her landlord evict her and her lose her family, even though your kids used to play together.

GS to Kecia: What is the truth about your life that people wouldn't know if they only read the newspaper, and if they believed the stereotypes?
Kecia: For two straight years I haven't reneged on anything. I've got up, gone to school. I've volunteered. I'm a community leader. I do things, get involved in what's going on around me. The way they stereotype it! There's a lot more people like me who are making a difference for themselves, as well as for others, because I'm not just trying to get all that Kecia can. I wish to help others and try to make a success for them. If I can help them with any resource I can, I will try, to go back into the community and encourage them to come to the meetings. . . . What a lot of people get upset about is they receive these letters from DSS [Department of Social Services] but they really don't know what it's saying or what it means. Some of these are just proposals, if they would just speak up, they could eliminate some of these proposals. They don't understand that they can make a difference. They stereotype us to be one way, but there's a lot of us who, we may not have the education, but we know enough to stand up for our concerns. Numbers make a whole lot of difference. We know enough to try to get the community organizations to try to come together and work on something so these people can have a difference. That's what it's all about.

124. See COLLINS, supra note 101:
  Many [Black] women begin their political activism as advocates for African-Americans, the poor, or, less frequently, women. But over time Black women activists come to see the interconnection of race, class, and gender oppression and the need for broad-based political action. Rather than joining a range of organizations each of which is devoted to single-purpose issues, many Black women activists either start new organizations or work to transform the institutions in which they are situated.

Id. at 156.
**GS to Nora:** What role does [Mothers for Justice] play in your life?

**Nora:** My not being educated as far as a lot of the things around me, I decided to get involved in Mothers for Justice so that I can find out about the political issues that I would say I was not educated about. I can go ahead and spread that information to other women who were in the same situation I was in. At Gateway College, at the Job Readiness program, I brought a lot of Mothers for Justice information in. A lot of other programs where I volunteer at, and even at my daughter's school. If we have workshops, I bring in a lot of the information from Mothers for Justice.

**Iva:** The best thing that happened to me as a member of the group is that I was able to organize another organization, that's Help 94, that's organized on similar concepts as Mothers for Justice. That's one of the best things that happened to me from the Mothers for Justice experience. It enabled me to develop more of a sense of self-reliance. [Help 94] basically counsels people and refers them to their resources and provides them with basic needs.

**Kecia:** Now by parents inquiring in the community that the community schools should be involved with the students in after school programs, I have karate for my son, my daughter's involved in dancing now. They don't even pass out the magnet school forms in our community. . . . There's a lot of stuff they eliminate from bringing to the urban areas. They don't pass out anything. I don't know, and I can't really speak on that. But I can imagine. One of the ladies at my school, they pass them out at her son’s school, but she stays out in Hamden. My kids are in the New Haven schools. . . . But because my daughter's upstairs in the daycare [at Gateway College], they have all the information there. I picked them up and got them for my kids because I said, “Why do my kids have to settle for less?” . . . As a young parent . . . you try to keep involved with your kids and with everything that surrounds them and the community is one of the main things.

**GS to Iva:** Was there a moment in your life when you knew that you had to speak out?

**Iva:** Yeah, there was one time when I said inside, “If I feel that there's no hope, someone else should feel the same.” And I looked around here and said, “these children have absolutely nothing to do.” And I was just upset about how the whole neighborhood had been stereotyped. Even though I had not been a Connecticut resident or a New Haven resident or West Haven [resident] all my life, I could see, my intellect would not let me not see what was going on. And I prayed, and I said, this is it, and I had to do it. . . . I just invited everybody who was a part of the political situation and I just kind of voiced it. Before I did that I talked to other people around, and they said, “You’re right.” And it just kind of went. It just kind of went. We have our Resource
Center in [the local] school, and we're working on some other things. Bringing the parents in so they can get their GEDs and focusing on bringing the parents in so they can get this interaction with the children. . . . We were very single-minded [in getting the Resource Center]. We just said, "Look, this is what we want." We told the City. We asked the senators down and all the bureaucrats from West Haven down. We were very vocal in the newspaper and on television. . . . We were just single-minded and wouldn't listen to no one about anything. Finally, a few people listened, and said, "These people are right. They may not be qualified to run the Resource Center. But we're qualified and we'll get the funds." The Resource Center has the GED. It has after-school programs for the children. It has tutoring. It has clothing. They consult with the family if they're having crisis in the family, if they need the domestic violence or the mental health; if they need food. And all those things are right there. That helps the whole family. It helps the child and it helps the parent.

*Jennifer*: I always tell people, you don't have to be a product of your environment. We live in the slums, in the ghetto, whatever, but you don't have to be a part of it. So I'm taking all the kids this summer, as many as I can pack into that big old '78 Oldsmobile Omega, out to the parks. Whether we're just going to Edgewood Park, it's not around here. Some people get that look, "Oh, you think you better than me." No, I don't think I'm better than anybody. I'm think I'm better than 99% of the situations that are out here though. I'm better than falling into the stereotypical welfare system and what they feel you're supposed to be, and so is everyone else. I'm better than being involved with somebody with a drug problem that'll tear me down because that's where he wants to be, 'cause I've been there. That's something a lot of people have to realize. . . . I've taught my son that the beauty, what makes you special, is to stand out and be first to be counted. And you'll find that when you're the one that stands first and is different, you gain respect and you suddenly become the leader. At first it might be a little lonely, but then you find a lot of people respect you for you being yourself. That's something I'm trying to show him.

D. Real Welfare Reform

*NEW HAVEN REGISTER, MAY 5, 1994: [A]ny approach that does not include adequate funding will only get people off welfare but not out of poverty. Funds are needed for jobs with skill development opportunities that promote a living wage. Child care and other forms of assistance must be provided to make it financially feasible to go to*
work. Health care reform is imperative so that children receive decent medical coverage while their parents work.\textsuperscript{125}

Most members of Mothers for Justice say that they too advocate welfare reform. Although some question why they cannot stay home with their small children, most accept that they must work outside the home. They agree that the welfare system could be changed to make people less dependent on assistance. But Governor Rowland’s cuts and time limits, they argue, are ineffective. Rather than threatening public benefits recipients with termination, Mothers for Justice members suggest providing supportive services, such as transportation, child care, job-training, and medical insurance that would enable women to find and keep stable employment.

Some commentators suggest instituting programs like MFJ’s proposed cooperative child care center, so that mothers can both work and remain near their children. Martha Minow asks, “Why not pay poor mothers to become child care providers, parent aides in the schools, and home visitors supporting other neighborhood families?”\textsuperscript{126}

\textit{GS to Gracie:} Why do you think the most recent round of welfare cuts started?\textit{Gracie:} One, [this] State is under financial trouble. Two, there is an outcry publicly for the welfare system to be “reformed,” using their words. I believe that the way they went about it is wrong. I do believe that we need to reform the system [so that] people are not so dependent on it. . . . But I can tell you the way we have done it is not the right way. I think that the system should help people. I don’t think by cutting their checks they’re helping people. I think you [should] provide these supportive services like the Job Connection program. . . . I’m thankful to it because I used it to get off welfare. I think that was . . . a program they could have worked on to move more people off the welfare rolls. But instead, they slash it. To me, it doesn’t make any sense. It provided women with what I think are two of the boundaries that keep them [off] welfare. It provided them with child care. It provided them with transportation. . . . [I]f you talk with most women they’ll say, “And why aren’t you going to work?”—“I don’t have anyone to take care of my kids. I don’t have any way to get there.” To me, it’s so simple. Those are two of the main things that keep women on welfare, so if you poured more money into those programs and then you would find more people moving up. O.K., that’s one side. But you have to have jobs there. That’s the big thing. No matter how much you train a person, no matter how much child care you give them, all these services are nothing without decent paying jobs. The State of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{125} Bonita Grubbs, \textit{As I See It: Funds Vital For Reform of Welfare}, NEW HAVEN REGISTER, May 5, 1994, at A10.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Minow, supra note 16, at 841.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Connecticut just does not have them. They run around saying that they do and I don't see them.

**GS to Kecia:** If you were going to design the welfare reform to make a good welfare to work transition, what things would you include?

**Kecia:** If I was to reform it [welfare], I would definitely keep programs that are working for mothers who have been on welfare, who haven't been back on welfare for the last two, three, four years, because they took the training and they're out there doing something. The training programs, and the college programs, and the GED programs should not be eliminated. I'm still on Job Connection. ... I've been on the program two years. ... You still have to keep a certain GPA. It's not like they're giving us anything. We're working hard to keep this GPA. ... I definitely would try to keep in mind the programs that are actually helping people. I'm one of the people who can exactly say that Job Connection has actually helped me. I'm not just sitting at home. They focus on the ones who are sitting at home. But what about the ones who were sitting at one time and who are now in these programs that do work. The transportation was definitely good, the bus pass every month to get my children, pick them up ... get them to the daycare, drop them off, get me back to school. The child care was a plus ... [b]ecause I could not pay for that out of the AFDC amount that I get. ... [F]or three kids, it's impossible. And I know that with three kids if I never want to get on State again, I have to get a career that is going to cover me and my children's medical. A plus for Job Connection: on a range of one to three, I would definitely give them three pluses.

**Iva:** There needs to be more incentives for employers because people don't want to take a chance, particularly the way money is. People don't want to take a chance on hiring someone they're going to do a whole lot of training or grooming [for]. So I think the right incentives should be in place.

**GS to Barbara:** You're not a mom, and you're not on assistance. Why are you a member of Mothers for Justice?

**Barbara:** I care about my community. I care about the people in my community. I have a lot of friends that are on assistance and that do have children and that are trying to get off of assistance. I think that basically the way the welfare cuts are going, it's going to be virtually impossible for them to survive. Because if they do find a job at McDonald's, if you've got six kids, sorry, but it's not going to do it. I think that they should try to supplement those who are trying to get up. I think that they should keep the Job Connection program that they've got now so that those who are trying to go to school, they can continue to go to school. I think that they should keep the child care because you can't go to school if you don't have a babysitter.
GS to Cheri: If Mothers for Justice were going to design welfare reform, what do you think the women would ask for?

Cheri: I think [Mothers for Justice members would] ask for adequate education and training for existing jobs and child care for kids that are old enough to go into child care when the mom decides that they’re old enough to go into child care. And flexible child care that would involve after-school programs as well as pre-school. Those are critical. Women do not have family supports adequate to take care of their kids. They’re not there.

E. Empowerment

NEW HAVEN REGISTER, MAY 5, 1994: It is to our advantage—short- and long-term—to reform our current [welfare] system to empower and enable individuals to become self-sufficient. It is also to our advantage to make sure that they play a significant role in changing the system that affects them so adversely.127

Cheri describes Mothers for Justice as an “empowerment group.” Certainly, most members of Mothers for Justice believe that the group has improved their self-esteem and their ability to negotiate the current political system. Some, however, also envision a time when Mothers for Justice members will not just lobby law-makers and bureaucrats, but will design and implement their own programs. These women feel that leadership by professionals will never be as effective as leadership from within a disadvantaged community.

GS to Iva: How did you get involved in Mothers for Justice?

Iva: I participated in some of the activities and what I got out of Mothers for Justice was that there needed to be more action by low income people. I found out also that there are advocates for low income people but that they are not effective. The issues come up about low income people [but] the solutions are hardly acceptable to the low income people. . . . I would just like to see some of the women in my position actually become a part of what they’re building, cause I don’t see it. . . . I just hope that a little more of a solid role-model situation could come out of Mothers for Justice, and other organizations, as being people that actually get a chance to implement the changes that they do . . . I don’t really think that social welfare programs are ineffective. What I think is that there should be less government invasion in these programs. Actually let people implement these programs.

Jennifer: [W]ith anything good, there’s always a big politician type . . . that comes and take things over. [B]efore you know it, who started it is kind of

lost, and the whole idea of it gets kind of lost. . . . I would think that in some organizations some big shot took over, who was just supposed to just oversee and instead took over. That's what I would think. And that's common. That is so common. It goes all the way back to kindergarten age. You got this piece of toy, somebody has broke it up and put it aside. This other kid comes along, puts it together and starts playing with it. The person who broke it up in the first place is sitting there watching it . . . waiting for you to fix it. The next thing you know, they took the toy and went off to play with their other friends and leave you there. But you're the one that fixed it!

GS to Kecia: What was the turning point for you when you really realized that you wanted to speak out?

Kecia: I was just one of those stereotypical persons who would sit back and say, “Let the government do what they're going to do. Oh, my vote doesn't matter.” . . . I started college and I started getting a new outlook on life and I started to see that my choice could make a difference.

Jennifer: I have a vision that Mothers for Justice will get grants and buy up some of the houses in the Hill and remodel them; make them affordable housing. I've seen documentaries where it's been done. Where the tenants are the caretakers. If you give tenants their own place, not just an apartment, but a house to claim, they want to make sure it stays nice and will work together to keep it that way. And that's where it becomes a community. I can see Mothers for Justice being a part of that. The tenants will work together to find a solution for problems that would come up such as, if an apartment was damaged, like holes in the wall, the tenant would have thirty days to fix [it] or move out. This clause would be put in the lease. And there would be monthly inspections. We're not having it torn down. I'm a firm believer, if you keep it honest or real in the beginning this way, there's no problems. You have to know, “We love this place. We worked hard to get it. We're not going to let it get torn up.” There will be no discrimination because of the number of kids you have, or your skin color, or age. If we kept that going in the first place, landlords caring about the place and so on, things would have calmed down a long time ago. . . . [Laughing] Well, you see I'm a visionary. I'm a visionary. I told them [other Mothers for Justice members]. They've heard my idea. I guess I was really focused on it cause at the time I was still trying to get a good place to live. The thing is we focus on what hits us. That's what keeps us a real grassroots organization. I think that's important.

GS to Gracie: What changed for you [that you began thinking] legislators worked for you? Was there one moment or was it gradual?

Gracie: I think it's gradual. I'm not going to say “I was sitting in my kitchen.” . . . [U]ntil you believe that “I deserve better,” or “I can do better,” and say
it and really believe it, then things change. Then you see legislators as, "They work for me. I don't work for them." Then you see that kind of stuff. Then you see, "Welfare's not good enough for me. I deserve better."

**F. Vision for Mothers for Justice**

Mothers for Justice members hope that in the future the group will expand to include the working poor and single people, as well as mothers on assistance. The MFJ women believe that issues and programs addressed by the group, such as homelessness and child care, are important to society at large. They perceive MFJ as a mainstream force for positive change in low-income communities, rather than as a marginalized grass-roots organization.

**GS to Karen:** What are your hopes for Mothers for Justice in the future?

**Karen:** I'd like to see the group expand to a lot of different suburban areas, as well as the inner city areas. I'd like to see more working people work with the group. Because it's good for us to have the people we have in it now, but I believe we would be taken a lot more seriously if we had more working-class people in our group. So I want to see us do a lot more as far as the people in our group.

**GS to Barbara:** What direction would you like Mothers for Justice to take in the future?

**Barbara:** In the future I want to get more networking out... I also want word to go out you don't have to be a mother to be a member. I also would like us to be... politically stronger... getting active in the community and the different projects going around: the homeless, rehabilitation, health care for those of us who can't get any. ... We're supposed to be trying to open up a daycare center. If we do open up the daycare center, I want it to be open to everybody, not just people in the Hill... Basically, I want it to be more visible.

**GS to Marjory:** What are some of your hopes for Mothers for Justice in the future?

**Marjory:** I'd like to see the group getting involved in just about everything that there will be a positive outcome in. I'd like for Mothers for Justice to be a household name: like refrigerator, T.V., Mothers for Justice.

**G. "Still I Rise"**

For the most part, Mothers for Justice members share "mainstream" American values and aspire to the middle-class American Dream. Contrary

128. ANGELOU, supra note 1, at 7.
to the popular stereotype of the “welfare mom” who is locked into a “culture of poverty,” Mothers for Justice members hope for economic self-sufficiency, stable family life, and education for themselves and their children.

**GS to Karen:** What are some of your goals and your hopes now?

_Karen:_ My main goal is to finish school and become a legal secretary. But I would like to go on to become a paralegal. Basically, I would like to get off AFDC and work and be able to support my children financially on my own. With no help from the State assistance. But I would also like to give back to that very same program that has given me what I've got today.

**GS to Sarah:** What are your hopes for the future?

_Sarah:_ My hopes for the future are that I will get the job with [the] University and climb the ladder and continue my education. Get my Bachelor's and maybe my Master's. I'll probably be one hundred years old and half dead. But that's what I want. I want to work. I want to raise my children to be proud of me. I don't want them to be on the welfare system. I don't want them to go through this. I want them to be able to stand on their own two feet. I don't want to have [them] to see me struggle for the rest of my life on welfare. They can see me struggle for the rest of my life working and trying to make ends meet. But I don't want to make them start the cycle all over again.

**GS to Nora:** What kind of hopes do you have for your daughter?

_Nora:_ I'm hoping that my daughter will grow up to not be too proud, first of all, and that she goes to school. If she doesn't get anything, get an education. Never be ashamed of where she came from. Always try to succeed no matter what. These are the things that I install in her.

**GS to Jennifer:** What are your hopes [for your son] for the future?

_Jennifer:_ I've already spoken to [my son about college]. I've been programming him, and I've allowed him to see me help my mommy though we don't live together. We don't always see eye to eye, but when she was having a hard time with her rent, I was helping her out. It wasn't much, it was just fifty dollars a week. And I was giving her groceries, and having her over for dinner or whatever every week. So, my son has a good feeling of unity and now he feels he needs to get a job and take care of me. Which is great because so many kids forget about their parents. But, honestly, I'm not planning to need his help! What I plan on doing is, if he does work and stay home before college, he will pay rent to me, and I'm going to open a separate savings account and just put his money away for him. And he'll have it for college. My son knows what I've been through, and he remembers that we've lost everything. And he has watched me struggle against all odds and succeed.

---

129. See GANS, supra note 13, at 6-7; KATZ, supra note 13, at 195-209.
And he knows he can succeed. And I will be cheering him on like he does for me. He wants to be either an inventor or an engineer. When he was two and a half, he created a way to fire Legos across the room using only Legos. And now he can fix anything and problem-solve pretty well.

**GS to Sharon:** What would you have wanted to do if you had stayed in school?

**Sharon:** I'd love a house. Save money. Have money for [my kids'] education, like if they wanna go to college or just to have money on hand. I don't know if it'll ever happen.

**GS to Marjory:** What are your hopes for your kids?

**Marjory:** I wish my children to live a nice, fulfilled life. Graduate from high school. Go on to college. Graduate from college. Get married. Have a little family of their own. Move out of my house. And for their husband to be set in a nice career goal so they don't have to worry about divorce. . . . I'd like to see them in good marriages.

**GS to Kecia:** Can you say what your goals are right now?

**Kecia:** I came into college, and I knew I wanted to be in a medical field, but I was quite undecided at the time. They sent me to this training program which helped. It helped me to broaden my idea of what I wanted to be, and nursing came about. That was a childhood dream, and now I'm more mature in life, I'm more stable, but it's still what I want to be—a nurse. So I decided to do volunteering to be sure that's what I actually want to do before I go out and do this. So I'm volunteering. I've been doing that about two years now, to make sure that this is what I want to do so I won't renege on it later . . . I had a couple of counsellors tell me, “Now, do you understand, there's so many thousands of people coming here wanting to be nurses, but ten apply every year and only one get accepted.” It was so discouraging, so down degrading. I said, “Well, Kecia, if this is what you want to be, you just put your mind to it.” Be what you want to be. Don't let nobody discourage you. I decided, “Kecia, this is what you want. This is what you do.” And this is what I'm doing. I decided, “Well, you go after what you want.” This is what I want.

### VII. EPILOGUE

One of my main goals for this narrative project was that it be a truly collaborative effort with Mothers for Justice. I aspired to achieve the “cultural synthesis” described by Paolo Freire, one of Cheri's favorite authors, in his groundbreaking work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* “In cultural synthesis, the actors who come from 'another world' to the world of the people do so not as invaders,” wrote Freire, “they do not come to teach or to transmit or to
give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people's world."\(^{130}\)

Yet throughout this process I continued to struggle with my role as author/editor/intern. I identified with Patricia Maguire's experience of participatory research:

By choosing participatory research, I had to constantly examine what that looked like in everyday life. Throughout the project, I questioned myself relentlessly: "How am I choosing to live my life? How am I choosing to be in the world? Whose side am I on?" I was often disappointed with my answers.\(^{131}\)

I was particularly suspicious of my tendency to view Mothers for Justice members' stories as good "raw material" for an article. At times I was disturbed by my sense of ownership of the piece and by the pleasure I took in arranging the women's quotes to create a coherent narrative. I remembered Daphne Patai's warning that, "although our informants agree to the interview and frequently seem to derive satisfaction from it, the fact remains that it is we who are using them for our projects."\(^{132}\)

Yet I also recognized aspects of the interviewing and editing process that could function as tools for the group's empowerment. Some women told me that they were using our interview as practice for employment interviews. Many described the interviewing process as cathartic. A few became more confident about speaking out in other public situations after being interviewed. In the course of the narrative project, the group decided to do a similar video project featuring members of Mothers for Justice and allied grassroots organizations Warriors for Real Welfare Reform, Women Helping Women and Mansfield Citizens for Social Welfare Justice.

To varying degrees, Mothers for Justice members shared my sense of ownership of the piece, and expressed pride in their own contributions. During one phone conversation, Jennifer told me that when she first read the quote from her interview at the beginning of the Prologue, she thought, "Oh, that's some of that poetry that [Giovanna's] quoting." Then Jennifer realized it was her own words and thought, "That's me! I said that!"\(^{133}\) Other women expressed excitement about their words appearing in the library and on computer databases such as LEXIS and Westlaw.

When I began this project with Mothers for Justice, I was concerned with difference and bridging the gap between myself and the featured women. Throughout the project, I continued to recognize important differences in life

\(^{130}\) FREIRE, supra note 44, at 161.

\(^{131}\) MAGUIRE, supra note 22, at 7.

\(^{132}\) PATAI, supra note 27, at 6.

\(^{133}\) Shay, Journal Entry, supra note 36, at Apr. 5, 1996.
experience that shaped our respective outlooks and sometimes hindered communication. In the end, however, I also recognized some common ground and potential commonalities. I found, sometimes to my surprise, that with the passage of time and shared experiences, many members of MFJ came to view me as a member of the group, someone who was expected to voice opinions in meetings and to participate in direct actions.

Yet although I appreciated it when women told me they considered me a member of the group, I also knew with nagging certainty that my privileged position as an upper middle-class white woman gave me alternatives denied many Mothers for Justice members. I was reminded of William Julius Wilson's analysis of the overlapping effects of race and class in determining one's life chances. In *The Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson wrote,

One's economic class position determines in major measure one's life chances, including the chances for external living conditions and personal life experiences. It is appropriate to point out in this connection that in a racist society—that is, a society in which the major institutions are regulated by racist ideology—the economic class position of individual minorities is heavily determined by race.134

My education, career options, and family support (all benefits in part attributable to my race and class) enable me to leave New Haven, if I want, and walk away from the problems confronting poor women. Mothers for Justice members, unfortunately, do not share my escape hatch, nor my safety net.

The complex interaction between shared history and unequal life chances struck me most forcefully when I learned that Christian Community Action moved to its present facility on Davenport Avenue in 1971,135 the same year that I was born three blocks away in Yale-New Haven Hospital. Now I attend Yale Law School, four blocks from the Elm Haven Housing Project where some members of Mothers for Justice live. Yet the New Haven that I was exploring for the first time with Mothers for Justice is for me and almost all of my classmates, relatives and friends, a totally unfamiliar landscape.136

We are divided by boundaries which, although born of intangible fears, stereotypes and assumptions, now perpetuate economic and racial oppression that is all too real. Were it not for these barriers, my life and the lives of the women of Mothers for Justice might have converged on a third, common path somewhere between our two present routes. Without these internal borders,

---

135. CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY ACTION, supra note 41.
136. The Regional Data Cooperative for New Haven booklet begins with a hand-drawn map entitled, "Overcoming the Limitations of Individual Perspectives," which illustrates how an individual's mental map of a city can be distorted by the person's own perspective, the location of their home and office, etc. REGIONAL DATA COOPERATIVE FOR NEW HAVEN, supra note 42, at 2.
residents of New Haven would live as one community. But instead, we live apart as two peoples: some of us metaphorically blind and deaf, others all too often mute.

I hope that this project will bring the words of the phenomenal women of Mothers for Justice to a wider audience. I also hope that that audience will heed their message, and replace punitive welfare cuts with real improvements to welfare, reforms that will support women in achieving economic security and pursuing their own life goals. As Kecia said at our final editing meeting, “It’s a human, real-life story, and we hope it touches someone.”

Now you understand
Just why my head’s not bowed.
I don’t shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing,
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It’s in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
The palm of my hand,
The need for my care.
’Cause I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.137

I tell my daughter and I tell my little cousins who are little kids now, “[Y]ou shouldn’t be ashamed of being on welfare, but [t]his is not where you should stop.” This is not your destiny, to be a mother. You can be a mother and something else. You should determine your place in society. What is a productive person for me may not be for you. [When] women on welfare, get that in their head, then they start seeing . . . everything differently. Men would probably say, “She’s acting bitchy.” But you’re walking around with your head held up high, saying, “This Is Me.” That kind of attitude. That’s what has worked for me. That’s certainly what I tell my little cousins and my little sister. I think it’s important to feel good about yourself. —Gracie

137. MAYA ANGELOU, Phenomenal Woman, in FOUR POEMS CELEBRATING WOMEN, supra note 1, at 3, 5-6.