

**Welfare Reform and Domestic Violence:
Implications for Women**

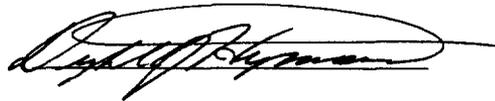
An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dwight Hymans", with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the high rates of domestic violence among poor women and the connection between poverty and domestic violence. It also discusses the impact of the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996 on victims of domestic violence and programs that are available to them, both effective and ineffective. Finally, it looks at what needs to be done by legislators to help victims gain employment and financial independence.

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In the United States alone, Domestic violence affects an estimated three to four million women every year (Kurz, 1998). This violence invades every aspect of the family's existence. It makes women who are victims unable to have normal lives and participate in daily activities that many Americans take for granted. They are often unable to have jobs and get an education, many times because their abusers forbid it. One study reported that one-third of the women surveyed stated that their abusers had prohibited them from working (Kurz, 1998). If a woman is able to leave an abusive partner, an act that requires much courage and bravery and is not without risk, she may be unable to work for fear of retaliation from her abuser at the workplace. Many abusers go to great lengths to prevent their victims from becoming financially independent (Akukwe, 1998). One woman told researchers of her situation:

“There were times where I couldn’t even get out of my room because I still had a hand print on my face. I couldn’t go to work because it was embarrassing...going to work, and you know that you are terrified. Or going to work and saying that you really don’t want to go home, and not being able to say why I don’t want to go home” (Lein, et al, 2001).

It is evident that domestic violence makes and keeps women poor (National Organization of Women, 1998). In a study done by the McCormack Institute and Center for Survey Research, 65% of welfare recipients had been abused by their husbands or boyfriends at some time in their lives. In another study, 60-80% of women on welfare reported being currently abused by a male. Poor women experience the most violence. The poorer the woman is, the more serious the violence. Studies have also shown that the lower a woman’s education, income, and occupational level, the more likely she was to

be battered (Kurz, 1998). In a 1997 report, the Bureau of Justice Statistics stated that women living in households with annual incomes under \$10,000 a year are four times as likely to be violently attacked than women in other income categories (Browne, et al).

There is little data to show why poor women are more likely to experience violence at the hands of their partners. Experts have speculated that the relationship between poverty and violence could have something to do with the values, life experiences, and ideologies of poor men. Those with lower incomes may subscribe to more traditional gender roles and feel that one of their roles as a male is to control their partners through whatever means necessary. They may have been socialized to believe that violence is an acceptable way of asserting their manhood and control over women. Perhaps poorer men use violence as a means of controlling their mates because they do not have any other means to control them. Higher-class men can (and do) use their economic resources to control their partners. If they are providing the family with income, they can choose to withhold it from their partners in order to restrict what they are able to buy and what they can do (Kurz, 1998).

In addition to poverty, domestic violence also leads to homelessness, child abuse and neglect, female alcoholism, mental illness, and attempted suicide (Sable, et al). Domestic violence invades every aspect of the victim's life, including her physical and mental health and well-being. In addition to physical injury, the abuse itself, whether it is emotional or physical, can cause depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder. If victims suffering from these psychological problems do not get professional help, they could commit suicide. Others may turn to drugs or alcohol to escape the pain and hopelessness they are experiencing (Tolman et al, 2001). Child abuse and neglect

may accompany domestic violence. If the batterer is abusing his partner, it is possible that he could abuse his children also. Women who are victims could be so overwhelmed and emotionally distraught by the abuse that they in turn abuse or neglect their children (Honeycutt et al, 2001).

All of the difficulties mentioned above make it extremely difficult for victims of abuse to earn a living and provide themselves and their children with basic necessities. If they do leave the abusive situation, they may find themselves with no resources or shelter. A 1990 study done by the Ford Foundation found that 50% of homeless women and children were fleeing abuse (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1999).

Victims of spousal abuse with little education or resources have very few options available to them to help them become self sufficient and free of their batterers. There are many battered women's shelters throughout the nation that exist to provide temporary housing and other forms of assistance to women in this situation. But these shelters have limits as to how many women and children they can house and how long those families can stay. Here in Muncie, A Better Way can house up to 22 women and children. They can stay for up to 45 days at a time. During their stay, they receive counseling for themselves and their children, assistance in finding employment and housing, and clothing that has been donated (Willett). But when their time at the shelter runs out, they may find themselves unable to support their families, even with the assistance that they received at the shelter. Often, the only choice that a victim of spousal abuse has to support herself and her family is to apply for public assistance (Lyon, 1998).

Unfortunately, welfare isn't meeting the vital needs of our nation's women and children. With the advent of the new welfare reform legislation in 1996, more families

are finding themselves unable to meet the work requirements involved, thus making them ineligible for assistance. The situations of domestic violence victims, in particular, make it difficult for them to find and follow through with education, training, and employment. The physical and emotional stress they are experiencing make it hard for them to participate in training and educational programs and find and maintain employment. Lack of childcare and transportation can make it impossible for them to leave the home in order to work. The actions often taken by abusers to prevent their victims from becoming independent (i.e. bruising their faces, terrorizing them at the work place, or threatening further abuse, etc.) make working a great challenge for victims. Some programs and legislation attempting to recognize and remedy this dilemma have failed miserably while others have worked to some extent. In this paper, I intend to show that welfare reform has a long way to go before it will benefit those families who most need it for survival (Tolman, et al., in press).

Since 1996, welfare in the United States has been radically different than it had been in its sixty-one year history. With the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, or the PRWORA, the eligibility requirements for welfare have changed dramatically. Now, more than ever before, the focus has been on going from welfare to work as quickly as possible. The AFDC, or Aid to Families with Dependent Children has been changed to TANF, or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, with emphasis placed by lawmakers on the word *temporary* (Sable, et al., 1999).

The new legislation requires recipients to obtain employment, job training, or some other form of education after two consecutive years on TANF. There is a lifetime

cap of five years on receiving assistance. In a move toward decentralizing our government, the responsibility for dispersing benefits has shifted from federal to state, with specific regulations and guidelines that each state must follow in order to receive federal funds in the form of block grants. States are allowed some discretion when creating programs and policies for distribution of TANF and other forms of assistance. Previously, state welfare costs were matched with federal funds. Now states are given penalties if their families fail to meet employment quotas in the form of lower federal block grants (Greenberg, 2001).

The PRWORA has many goals: cutting welfare caseloads, making welfare a temporary, transitional system, reducing spending, and discouraging out-of-wedlock pregnancies. In the time since the act has been implemented, employment among low-income parents has risen, child poverty has fallen, and states have expanded services for poor families. However, many families have lost benefits without finding work and many that have found employment have experienced little increase in economic well being (Greenberg, 2001).

Victims of domestic violence are among those individuals that could be harmed by the new welfare regulations. The situation they are in makes it nearly impossible to maintain employment. Batterers do not want their victims to leave them and be independent. Therefore they go to great lengths to stop that from happening, sometimes even after the victim has left her abuser (Browne et al, 1999).

Abusers often sabotage their victims' efforts to get an education or maintain a job, destroying necessary paperwork, materials, clothing, or bruising their victim's faces. Often batterers stalk their victims and come to the places where they work, threatening

and terrorizing them (Browne et al, 1999). Through verbal abuse, many abusers tear their victims down so much that they lose any self-confidence and any hope they may have had for the future. One woman expressed the plight of domestic violence victims seeking employment and self-sufficiency by sharing her experiences: “I went for a job interview recently. I did great until I came to the part where you have to type something on the computer. I did bad. They must have thought I was lying. I froze up. They didn’t have machines like that at [local business school], not at all. Also, one thing that happened during my marriage was that my confidence in my ability to work got a bit destroyed. He tore me down all the time” (Kurz, 1998).

Research has found that women who suffer from intimate partner violence are more likely to miss days of work, have been unemployed in the past, and report mental and physical health problems that could affect job performance and employment status. They worked less, on average, because of the partner violence and also the need to stay home and protect their children (Browne, et al, 1999).

Fortunately, legislators realized that there are some groups of Americans who, because of their situations and life experiences, are unable to meet the work requirements for TANF receipt. For up to 20% of welfare recipients, a hardship exemption from job training and work requirements is available. This could include those suffering from physical or mental disability, mental illness or those who are teenage parents (Sable, et al, 1999).

The Family Violence Option was created specifically for victims of domestic violence by Senators Paul Wellstone (Democrat, Minnesota) and Patty Murray (Democrat, Washington). They recognized that abuse often makes it impossible for

women to maintain employment and made this waiver to exempt them from having to meet the work requirement in order to receive TANF (Pavetti, 2000).

States are given the option whether or not to adopt this amendment to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. State legislatures decide how this Option is enacted for their state, if it is at all. Prior to the PRWORA, states had to follow strict federal guidelines in order to receive matching federal funds for welfare. Now they have more power to implement or not implement programs and policies for domestic violence victims. As of 1999, 31 states had chosen to implement the Family Violence Option and an additional 9 states were in the process of doing so. The remaining 10 states had provisions within their welfare plans to assess domestic violence victims, referring them to services and deferring them from the work requirements (Raphael, 1999).

To obtain this waiver, women must be aware that it exists and want to use it. However, most women have no knowledge of the Family Violence Option. If they are told about it, they often are resistant to using it because they want to find jobs and earn a living. In a study done by Laura Lein in which domestic violence victims seeking TANF were interviewed, the majority of the women said that they did not want the waiver because they wanted to work and support themselves and their families. Only a small percentage of the women interviewed sought the waiver and thought it was useful to them. This study shows that while most women want to work and not rely on waivers and exemptions, some women do benefit greatly from them. The Family Violence Option and other waivers are useful to some domestic violence victims, but finding ways to help them find gainful employment should be the priority (Lein, 2001).

In order for workers to know that a client is a victim of domestic violence, they must conduct an evaluation or screening. However, most women do not come to the welfare office to disclose their status as victims of domestic violence. They see it as irrelevant and do not perceive getting services for the problem as a priority in their lives. Their priorities are finding housing, money, and legal services (Lein, 2001).

Often the questions asked in the domestic violence screening are of an extremely personal nature. Naturally, victims often feel uncomfortable and embarrassed answering them and may not do so truthfully. From the workers' standpoint, asking these embarrassing questions about intimate details of their clients' lives is not a particularly desirable part of the job. This aspect has served to dissuade workers from conducting the screening at all, leaving many women in the dark about services and exemptions that may be helpful to them (Levin, 2001).

Options/Opciones is a program that was started in the Illinois Department of Health and Human Services in conjunction with the Rainbow House and Mujeres Latinas en Accion, two community-based providers of domestic violence services. This project entailed the screening of all TANF participants who came into that office. Those who identified themselves as victims would be given the option of participating in the program. Then one of the domestic violence advocates would do an intake interview in order to determine what services that participant would need. These include counseling, group workshops on TANF-to-work transitioning, and case management for their other needs.

At first the program seemed as though it would bring about the desired result of giving victims of domestic violence individualized care and services. Of the women who

expressed a desire to participate in the program, 35% actually followed through with the services. While this does not appear to be an impressive percentage, the fact that these women are domestic violence victims must be taken into account. The very nature of their problem makes it very difficult for them to follow through with services and participate in programs. Of that 35%, 56% went on to be involved in work-related activities, including paid employment, vocational training, and educational activities.

A few months after the implementation of the program in Chicago, problems with the delivery of the services began to become glaringly obvious. This was illustrated by the fact that out of the 4,000 TANF participants served by that office, only an average of eight per month participated in the Options/Opciones program. One explanation for this was the domestic violence screening process. It was a long and drawn out process that many women were unwilling to go through. As previously stated, they did not come to the welfare office to get domestic violence services. They came to get benefits. Many women did not want to admit to a total stranger that they were abused, no matter how much they needed the services. For many, there is an element of shame involved in being a victim of spousal abuse. Later the long screening form was thrown out and workers were encouraged to screen for victims in a more informal manner. Some did this and some did not, leaving many women unable to participate in the program because of their lack of knowledge about it.

Another major problem with the program was the poor communication between the TANF workers and the domestic violence advocates. These two groups held different perspectives and had different views about the validity of this program. The TANF workers resented the added work that they had to do within their already busy days. The

domestic violence advocates were at their mercy for referrals of clients and sometimes the TANF workers simply did not want to make the referrals, for whatever reason. TANF caseworkers were resistant to this intrusion into their office. Many of them had been employed there for many years and were comfortable with the status quo.

The attitudes of the TANF caseworkers about domestic violence proved to be somewhat surprising. A study conducted in another TANF office found that over 20% of the workers were victims of domestic violence themselves. Victims of spousal abuse that work there may be resentful that the women that they are serving have options and services available to them, while they may not have. In order to ascertain whether the caseworkers were opposed to referring clients for domestic violence services or just referrals in general, mental health and substance abuse counselors were brought in to do intakes on TANF recipients. Caseworkers were asked to screen women for these issues also and refer them to the counselors. The caseworkers referred an average of 25 women a month to the services that dealt with mental health and substance abuse, while referring an average of only four or five women per month to the Options/Opciones program which provided domestic violence services (Levin, 2001).

Child support is often viewed as an extra source of income that can possibly serve as a substitute for welfare. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act addresses the need for fathers to pay support for their children. It imposed quotas and performance standards for states for establishing paternity and child support orders. In addition, it provided child support agencies with tools to help them better enforce the payment of child support (Pearson, 2001).

There are cooperation requirements in place to mandate that women do everything they can to help establish paternity of their children and locate the fathers. If the women do not cooperate with this search, they can be subject to penalties. This can be dangerous for victims of domestic violence, as “child support actions are perceived to have the potential to renew the violence because they can notify the abuser of the victim’s location, precipitate physical contact between the abuser and the victim in the courtroom, and/or stimulate desires for custody and visitation that could lead to regular and dangerous contact” (Pearson, et al, 2001).

Because of this possibility of violence and the penalties for non-cooperation, the regulations of TANF are in effect making women choose between safety and receiving public assistance. There is a “good cause” exemption built-in to the legislation to address this issue, but most women are not informed about it and do not apply for it. Applying for the exemption would require disclosing domestic violence, an act which many women are reluctant to do for reasons previously stated.

Three states have implemented projects designed to meet the needs of victims for safety and self-sufficiency when working with child support agencies. In Colorado, Minnesota, and Massachusetts, programs are in place to identify domestic violence victims in public assistance and child support agencies and improve cooperation within child support agencies and identify barriers to that cooperation (Griswold, et al, 2000).

Colorado was one of the first states to test the process of screening victims of domestic violence in TANF offices. This process involved notifying all applicants that victims of spousal abuse may apply for certain exemptions if cooperating with TANF’s requirements might cause them to be further victimized by their abusers. It used a brief

questionnaire in order to find out who needed the “good cause” exemption and gave the individuals that information.

In Massachusetts, three methods of identifying domestic violence victims were tested. The first was universal notification by public assistance workers to all applicants about domestic violence issues and the options that existed to seek waivers and exemptions. The second method involved notification of domestic violence waivers and exemptions plus assistance for victims from on-site specialists knowledgeable in the area of domestic violence, community resources, and the waivers and exemptions. The third method combined the first two and added direct questioning of applicants by public assistance workers using an explicit behavioral question.

The Minnesota project, carried out in Hennepin County, dealt with methods of improving cooperation with child support agencies. Part of it entailed the screening of custodial parents and relative caretakers for problems with childcare, transportation, alcohol abuse, mental or physical health issues, custody and visitation, and spousal abuse. Clients expressing an interest in receiving assistance in these areas are referred to community services. The steps taken in this program included: the notification of domestic violence waivers by workers, the screening of applicants for barriers to cooperation by child support workers, and the assessment of clients who disclose those barriers with referrals to community resources by child support workers (Griswold et al, 2000).

Much was learned from studying these programs about the desire of domestic violence victims to seek child support and become self-sufficient. It also gave researchers data about the nature of the abuse and the problems that victims face. In

Colorado, 75% of the women who disclosed domestic violence stated that their abuser was the father of their children. 57% of those surveyed in Minnesota indicated that the father of their children was also their batterer. This shows the high rates of abuse by non-custodial parents who usually owe child support. If victims of this abuse decide to pursue child support, they are putting themselves at risk for further violence because of the possibility of disclosing their location to the abuser. If a batterer does not want to pay child support, he could be angered over the fact that he is being forced to and victimize his partner again (Griswold, et al, 2000).

In Colorado, 93% of those interviewed said they did want to pursue child support and 72% in Minnesota stated this. In Massachusetts, 50% of respondents stated that their abuser still posed the threat of harm, but they still wanted to pursue child support. These statistics support the theory that TANF recipients do want to be self-sufficient and not rely on the government to support themselves and their families (Pearson, et al, 2001).

Childcare, or the lack of it, is another issue that welfare recipients must work through. These women are told to find childcare by a certain time or they will receive sanctions, but they are given little assistance in doing so. Parents who hastily arrange childcare to meet requirements can be putting their children in dangerous situations with unqualified caretakers. One mother with an eight-day-old baby went to a Job Center seeking public assistance. The workers there told her that she would have to begin working the next week, although that is contrary to the law of that state, which allows mothers of children under one year of age a three month exemption from work requirements. The mother in this case told the worker that she was breastfeeding her infant and could not leave the baby to go to work. The worker told her that the baby

should be “independent.” The mother, afraid of being denied benefits, had a friend watch her baby and went to work. During that time, the baby would not drink from a bottle and subsequently had to be hospitalized for dehydration (Light, 1999).

That story illustrates the situations of many welfare recipients who are forced to work in order to receive benefits. Many are told that they do not qualify for government subsidized childcare. These individuals are then denied the benefits entitled to them and the opportunity to find employment because they choose not to leave their children in unsafe environments (Light, 1999).

The United States Department of Health and Human Services administers a grant called the Child Care and Development Fund. This program aims to give parents more options to meet their childcare needs and enhance the quality and supply of childcare for all families. The Fund also created strong standards for childcare providers to ensure the health and safety of children. While this subsidy is extremely beneficial to those who receive it, it is not a guaranteed entitlement for all TANF recipients (Gong, et al, 1999).

Mothers who experience domestic violence may be more reluctant than other parents to allow others to care for their children while they work. Those that have left the abusive situation may fear that the abuser will kidnap the children and possibly harm them while they are in the care of others. The women may feel that it is their responsibility to keep their children safe from the abuser and therefore do not want to be apart from them, even if it means being able to work and earn a living (Browne et al, 1999).

There are many welfare-to-work programs to help welfare recipients who are victims of domestic violence gain employment and job training. While these programs

are necessary to help women find and maintain jobs, must take into account the high levels of violence that many women on welfare experience and the barriers that prohibit them from participating in the programs before they will provide the intended financial freedom for these women (Sable, et al, 1999).

The creators of welfare reform tend to blame welfare mothers for the country's economic problems and see mandating employment as the only reasonable and appropriate option for women who need assistance. There is not enough emphasis on helping women better care for their children, leave an abusive situation, and overcome other difficulties that they may be experiencing such as substance abuse (Hirsch, 2001).

The welfare reform law fails to address the creation of new jobs or the fact that it is essentially impossible for most single-parent families to survive on minimum-wage pay, which is the rate that many jobs requiring little skill and education pay their employees (Sable, et al, 1999). The educational options available to women on welfare are also limited and give them little hope to rise above their situations and gain independence. They are given little opportunity to pursue higher educational degrees that would be beneficial to them in finding employment later. Many stereotype women that receive public assistance as unintelligent and incapable of being educated. Therefore, many women with much potential, but few resources, fall through the cracks and have no chance to change that stereotype (Fine et al, 2000).

Unfortunately, one of the main drives for welfare reform was to ease the strain on the federal budget and that of states. It is evident that with the focus on saving money, creating new programs and services for welfare recipients that will cost taxpayers even more money is not a very popular plan. While there are some effective programs in

existence to deal with domestic violence and help women on the road to self-sufficiency, many fail in these duties and need drastic changes. In some areas of the country, these programs aren't even present, leaving a great void in the lives of many who are in need of them (Honeycutt, 2001).

The policies aimed at battered women introduced in the PRWORA “reveal a great deal about the state’s view of violence against women, including what commitments the state is willing to make to reduce male violence and whether it will honor them”, stated Demie Kurz, in a 1998 article (Kurz, 1998). Violence against women needs to be taken seriously, by law enforcement officials, those in the legal system and those on Capital Hill. Laws against spousal abuse must be enforced and stronger punishments need to be in place for those who break those laws. One of the most vital functions of government is to protect its citizens, both in the private and public sphere. This should include women who are being abused. Often it does not. Instead, these women are told to get jobs, even though their situations often make it impossible for them to do so. They are told to get off the welfare rolls through whatever means possible, but are given little or inadequate assistance to accomplish this (Fine et al, 2000).

For the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act to work for the highest possible good, changes need to be made in its design, programs, and delivery. States should not be given the option to implement domestic violence screening and services; they should be mandated to do so and given federal funds to assist them. They should not have a choice of whether or not to offer the Family Violence Option and good cause exemptions for child support cooperation. These should be required options

for women. If these options are going to be available, women must be told about them so they can benefit from them (Lein et al, 2001).

Childcare subsidies need to be accessible to all women receiving TANF. Those with young children should be given more opportunity to stay home and care for them, without the fear of losing benefits. Parents must be informed of their options and right to choose the best childcare for the children instead of being forced to leave their children in potentially dangerous environments while they are at work. The safety and well-being of children who benefit from TANF need to be the foremost concerns, not making sure their mothers are employed (Light, 1999).

State workers in the offices of welfare and child support need to be trained on sensitivity to their clients' special needs and situations. They need to be encouraged to treat the women that they serve with respect and dignity and gain their confidence and trust. Only then will women seeking benefits feel comfortable sharing their stories of violence with the only people who can refer them to the services that they so desperately need. The Options/Opciones program and others that have been studied illustrate the apathy and lack of sensitivity that is seen in TANF caseworkers. Unless their attitudes are changed, those programs will never be seen by those in need of them as a promising alternative to violence and poverty (Levin, 2001).

To better address the needs of women who are victims of domestic violence, several improvements would be required. These include better tracking of the rates of women who disclose domestic violence, greater attention to whether women who disclose violence are actually receiving services, and internal monitoring to see whether the policies and programs to address domestic violence are being implemented correctly.

More research needs to be done on the programs that are in existence and new avenues need to be explored and tested. Domestic violence advocates and welfare workers need to come together to work towards addressing the needs of women for economic freedom and safety (Raphael, 1999).

Some states have developed innovative practices for educating individuals about domestic violence, providing services to prevent it, and assisting those who experience it. In California, education and counseling services target adolescent boys and young men to cover issues like the prevention of domestic violence. In Colorado, domestic violence task forces have been formed to train public health practitioners and those in the criminal justice system on working with victims of domestic violence. In Michigan, a domestic violence component was incorporated into its family preservation program, called Families First. It involves a training curriculum for family preservation workers and creates a program to provide these services to at-risk families in battered women's shelters. In Nevada, training is given to staff involved in administering TANF that includes a focus on domestic violence. They are also working towards educating the public, judicial personnel, and law enforcement on domestic violence matters. Minnesota has long been a progressive state in terms of welfare programming and it has implemented a project that involves social service agencies, police, prosecutors, family and criminal court judges, jails, shelters, health care providers, and child welfare workers in a community wide effort to prevent domestic violence and help victims. In Washington, the Address Confidentiality Program consists of a confidential system of post office addresses for victims of domestic violence. Victims can also disguise their addresses when establishing records with state and local agencies. Former Governor

Lowery issued an executive order requiring each state agency and institution of higher education to create a workplace environment that provides assistance, ensures personnel policies and procedures that are responsive to victims of domestic violence, and makes these policies available to all state employees. These programs are encouraging and show that many state officials are committed to ending domestic violence and serving its victims, but so much more can be done (Kaplan, 1997).

Last year, in the 106th Congressional session, the Battered Women's Economic Security and Safety Act was introduced in the Senate as S. 1069 and in the House of Representatives as H.R. 5262. It includes a section on violence against women in the workplace. The bill ensures employment protection for battered women, including entitlement to paid leave to address their abuse and unemployment compensation when a woman is fired "due to circumstances directly resulting from the individual's experience of domestic violence" (U. S. Senate, S. 1069, U. S. House of Representatives, H.R. 5262).

While this bill, if passed, will provide job security and protection for those domestic violence victims already employed, it says little about those who have been unable to find jobs. Congress has paid little attention to addressing the difficulties for domestic violence victims of meeting the TANF work requirements, finding child care, and participating with child support agencies. Instead of giving women real options for working towards economic independence, they are provided with waivers and exemptions from doing so.

The safety of poor women and children should be a top priority to lawmakers. The policies and programs that they create should reflect this. If domestic violence and

its affect on families are not taken seriously, this problem will continue to plague our nation for generations to come. Women need to be helped to overcome abuse and become self-sufficient through any viable means necessary. Public assistance is one of those means and should be designed to benefit those who need it and get them started on the road to safety and economic freedom.

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