IN PRINT

Women's work

By Phyllis Eckhaus

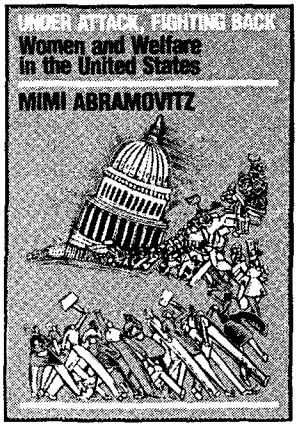
As the global free market gobbles up and excretes low-wage workers, protections won by working people are disintegrating. In our supposedly civilized United States, workers must compete against their most exploited international counterparts—with dire consequences. At a 1993 conference on low-wage women workers sponsored by the Department of Labor, an advocate reported that piece workers at a Nabisco cracker factory were so hard-pressed that they "chose" to wear diapers rather than take bathroom breaks.

If we had a humane, adequately funded welfare system, would some of these women choose the dole over the cracker factory? One hopes so. Yet as I write this, President Clinton has vowed to keep women in diapers. By signing the "welfare reform" bill and thus removing the tattered remnants of our social safety net, he has put millions of poor people at the mercy of the most avaricious employers. Any work—no matter how degrading, dangerous or poorly paid—is deemed more dignified than taking government support to care for one's children.

One of the many virtues of *Under Attack, Fighting Back* is the way Mimi Abramovitz links attacks on welfare to businesses' interest in cheap and exploitable labor. In the '40s and '50s, the "farm policies" of Southern states deliberately denied benefits to black women in order to force them into the fields during harvest season. Abramovitz cites a Louisiana civic leader who in 1954 bluntly complained that "public assistance results in reducing the unskilled labor ... in employment where women and children form a principal part of the supply." In the '60s, when the gap between welfare grants and the minimum wage began to narrow, Congress passed harsh "work incentive" programs that channeled thousands of AFDC mothers into low-wage jobs and deterred others from even applying for benefits. Abramovitz observes that these programs increased the size of the labor pool, effectively subsidizing low-pay employers by making it possible for them to attract workers without raising wages.

Though the book was published in March, before the passage this summer of welfare reform, it remains up to date. Abramovitz, a professor of social work at the City University of New York, wrote this extraordinarily lucid and useful volume to educate and motivate welfare advocates. In compact sections, she describes current and historical attacks on welfare, offers gender-sensitive theories of the welfare state, and provides an overview of underpublicized welfare advocacy.

Her account shows how welfare has been recast from a public investment in children to the most scorned example of big government's largesse toward the undeserving poor. When the federal government first implemented payments to poor mothers during the Depression, widows were one of the main categories of beneficiaries. Welfare was only one of several "entitlements"—benefits not linked to the annual federal budget process—contained in the 1935 Social Security Act, which also included Old Age Insurance (now known as Social Security) and Unemployment Insurance. In 1939, when Old Age Insurance was expanded to cover widows and children, welfare was transformed into the stigmatized domain of divorced and unwed mothers, as well as widowed black women whose husbands had not earned enough to qualify for the more generous Social Security benefits. Welfare became the only entitlement that subjected recipients to morals tests; if home visits revealed signs of a male presence or questionable child-rearing practices, mothers were denied benefits.



Abramovitz argues that attacks on welfare directly threaten all women, not just the poor. Welfare reform, she says, serves as a "launching pad" for assaults on other social programs that give women support in their caretaking roles. When policy-makers condemn welfare as a waste of taxpayer dollars, other government-funded health, education, childcare and social service programs become vulnerable to the same harsh budget-cutting frenzy. Punitive and puritanical new welfare policies also undermine reproductive freedom by using economic coercion to control women's sexual and childbearing behavior. And attacks on welfare endanger women's economic independence: Not only do women lose the opportunity to

Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States
By Mimi Abramovitz
Cornerstone Books/ Monthly Review Press
160 pp., $13

Choosing to Lead: Women and the Crisis of American Values
By Constance H. Buchanan
Beacon Press
276 pp., $25

use welfare as an escape route from poverty, but fewer jobs are available to them because of cutbacks in the social service sector, which traditionally employs mainly women. Still, Abramovitz's claim that all women are hurt by welfare reform seems somewhat overblown; attacks on welfare most directly harm low-wage workers—male and female alike—and women with children.

Neatly summarizing feminist theory, Abramovitz describes what she calls the "gendered welfare state," constructed along gender as well as class lines. Considering only its class dimensions, some traditional Marxists denounced welfare as capitalism's self-protective Faustian bargain with the poor. Feminist analyses, however, reveal welfare's "emancipatory possibilities" for women—for all its flaws, welfare is often the only way that women can free themselves from abusive male partners and exploitative employers.

Under Attack, Fighting Back ends with a compendium of activist efforts by and on behalf of poor women. Abramovitz is dismissive of the Depression-era middle-class reformers who helped establish the welfare state; she concludes that "regardless of the reformers' intent ... it is generally agreed that they helped create highly gendered notions of women's citizenship on the one hand, and deepened the state's involvement in the private lives of less privileged women on the other." Yet the reformers helped found the very system Abramovitz is now fighting so hard to protect; surely they deserve some credit for their efforts. One also wonders whether the reformers should be held responsible for inventing gendered notions of women's citizenship. The ideology of true womanhood consigned women to the domestic sphere long before the creation of the welfare state; the reformers simply deployed their own presumed domestic authority to political advantage.

Abramovitz reserves her enthusiasm for poor women's protests. She revels in their potentially revolutionary challenges to authority—from the turn-of-the-century boycotts of overpriced kosher meat markets to the small but valiant demonstrations of today. Urging women to take to the streets, Abramovitz concludes by quoting Frederick Douglass: "Power concedes nothing without demand."

In *Choosing to Lead*, Constance Buchanan also urges women to act, but her vision of female leadership sounds more like sermons and tea sandwiches than womanning the barricades. The Harvard Divinity School professor argues that women must reclaim their tradition of moral authority in order to restructure American society. Wistfully recalling the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and settlement house reformers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, she argues that those advocates of yore successfully combined a social welfare sensibility with a commitment to women's equal rights. Women today, she says, must learn from their example.

The reformers Buchanan admires deserve credit for their accomplishments, but it's hard to cast them as lead players in the struggle for women's rights. A good number opposed suffrage, claiming that they would be "better citizens without the ballot" because the vote would taint their powers of moral suasion. Early 20th-century reformers also led the first fights against the Equal Rights Amendment; they feared the ERA would overturn hard-won, gender-specific laws protecting women from hazardous work conditions. And while it's true that during the 1880s Frances Willard convinced the Woman's Christian Temperance Union to join women's suffrage ranks "for the protection of the home," the ultra-domestic WCTU was scarcely in the women's rights vanguard.

Buchanan's favored reformers were social welfare advocates. While some of these were active in the campaign for women's rights, the feminist and social welfare movements were not the same, nor were their agendas entirely compatible. To the extent that social welfare reformers claimed moral authority based on the selflessness of their concerns, they subverted the feminist position that women, as human beings, have the right to speak out on their own behalf. By urging compassion for the suffering poor, the reformers also objectified poor women and short-circuited discussion of a right to subsistence. By linking their authority to women's concern for home and family, they gained mainstream support for significant social change—but in the process, they reinforced a degraded and sentimental concept of women's role.

Arguably, Buchanan does the same. While she takes pains to distinguish herself from "difference" feminists, she too thinks women are special—possessed of an "acute awareness" of others. Her claim for women's moral authority, based on women's care for others, feeds into a backlash that condemns rights-based feminism as selfish. Indeed, Buchanan repeatedly blames equal rights feminists for the problems of society at large. For example, she implies that feminists are to blame for the devaluation of women's unpaid work: If they would only accord motherhood and domesticity proper respect, the status of women's unpaid work would be elevated, and businesses would be shamed into subsidizing family life. It never occurs to her that women's unpaid work is devalued precisely because it's unpaid. In our money-conscious society, one presumedly gets what one pays for.

Though Abramovitz and Buchanan differ sharply in their response to the middle-class reformers of yesteryear, both imply that social welfare advocacy is properly "women's work." Their appeals to women create the risk that even progressives will relegate welfare issues to a gender ghetto, reserved for suffering poor women and children, and the women who care about them. This gender-based approach to welfare stereotypes women, trivializes the significance of welfare to men, and, most important, diverts discussion away from the baseline protections a civilized society owes all its members, male and female. Until progressives defend welfare as a human right, we will continue to concede to conservatives the terms of the social contract. ◀

Phyllis Eckhaus is a Brooklyn-based writer.

Papa don't preach

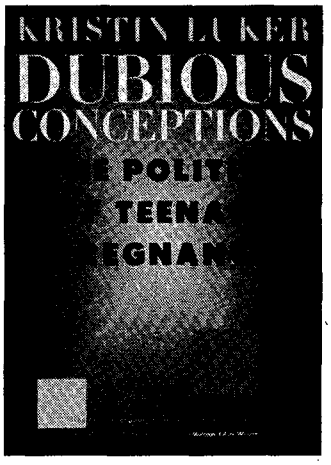
By Kim Phillips

The consensus is in on teen pregnancy: It's single-handedly responsible for the decline of Western civilization. Charles Murray was the first to sound the alarm in an acclaimed 1993 *Wall Street Journal* editorial that declared that "illegitimacy is the single most important social problem of our time—more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, welfare or homelessness, because it drives everything else." California Gov. Pete Wilson concurred: "All of the problems tearing apart the fabric of our society have deep roots in the exploding epidemic of out-of-wedlock births." Jesse Jackson put in his two cents: "Babies having babies is morally wrong." And Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala chimed in: "I don't like to put this in moral terms. But I do believe that having children out of wedlock is just wrong." President Clinton claimed in his 1995 State of the Union Address that "the epidemic of teen pregnancies and births where there is no marriage is our most serious social problem," and his domestic policy adviser William Galston declared an "all-out cultural war" against teen pregnancy.

In the midst of so much sanctimony and hyperbole, one might be tempted to ignore a book on teen pregnancy entitled *Dubious Conceptions*—but this would be a mistake. Kristin Luker's new book offers a clearly written, much-needed survey of the recent academic literature on teenage motherhood, as well as an insightful overview of historical attitudes toward early childbearing and single mothers. She does such an effective job of exposing the sloppy scholarship and political calculations driving the debate on teen pregnancy that by the end of the book, the reader is left somewhat mystified: If teen pregnancy is neither new nor responsible for the ills attributed to it, why does the issue resonate with so many people?

The transparency of the teen pregnancy "discourse" becomes clear to anyone who does what Luker does in her book: skip the moralizing and look at the facts about teenage motherhood. Summarizing recent academic research and compiling some statistical data of her own, Luker demonstrates pretty convincingly that the widespread argument that teen pregnancy is the catalyst for deepening inner-city poverty has no basis in reality. First of all, the reports of an "epidemic" of teen births have been wildly exaggerated. Historically, shifts in fertility rates among teenagers have closely matched those among other age groups: They decreased during the 1930s, sharply increased during the 1950s, and declined steadily during the '70s and '80s, the same years when "teen pregnancy" became the byword for black poverty. The birthrate among black teenagers is much higher than that among white teens, but this has been true for the entire century. In fact, during the '80s the birthrate among black teens decreased slightly, while the birthrate among white teens went up. Most teen mothers aren't Jesse Jackson's "babies having babies"; the overwhelming majority of them are women in their late teens, and only a tiny fraction—2 percent—are women under 15. Birthrates for these youngest women have remained more or less stable over the past 70 years. The conclusion is obvious: Teenage motherhood is nothing new.

Much of the academic research purporting to show that teen parenthood leads to welfare dependency, criminal behavior, low birth weights and (plug your favorite social problem in here) is equally groundless, mainly because researchers have tended to compare teenage mothers to the general population instead of to women of the same socio-economic class. Eighty percent of the women who become teenage mothers grow up poor; obviously no one would quibble with the idea that poor people are more likely to use welfare. The same confusion of correlation with causality vitiates most other claims about the high costs of teenage pregnancy. For example, it's true that babies born to teen mothers have lower birth weights than those born to older women, and that teens are more likely than adults to experience complications in pregnancy and childbirth. But this is not because they are young, but because—like poor women of all ages—they lack adequate medical care during pregnancy. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, about a third of all pregnant teens lack adequate prenatal care, as opposed to only about 15 percent of pregnant women in general. In Western Europe, where prenatal care is universally available, teen mothers have fewer complications in pregnancy than older women.



Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy
By Kristin Luker
Harvard University Press
283 pp., $24.95

When it comes to completing high school, social class—rather than the simple fact of having given birth as a teen—again seems to be the decisive factor. (Never mind that in the good old days, pregnant teenagers were forbidden to attend