

Who's Afraid of the Welfare Queen? Stigmatized Motherhood, Tropes and the Policing of the American Poor

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Ann Cammett, [Deadbeat Dads & Welfare Queens: How Metaphor Shapes Poverty Law](#), 34 **B.C.J.L. & Soc. Just.** 233 (2014).

Who's afraid of the welfare queen? Apparently everyone. These days, the average American sees the welfare queen as a key threat to social order; the conservative movement's battle for hearts and minds decisively has been won. Numerous scholars, from [Michele Gilman](#)¹ to [Kaaryn Gustafson](#),² have attempted to combat prevailing views of the welfare queen, providing us with an expansive, rich understanding of the ways in which the construct continues to shape contemporary poverty debates about poor single mothers. [Ann Cammett](#), in her recent article recent *Deadbeat Dads and Welfare Queens: How Metaphor Shapes Poverty Law*, takes the conversation in a new, exciting direction; she demonstrates how the discursive constructs used to pathologize poor mothers have morphed to implicate us all.

Family law scholars know that discursive inquiries are an invaluable resource, particularly when gender constructs play a central role in the way legal claims are articulated in a given domain. However, thus far, family law scholars have focused on how ideal tropes and stories of perfect, heroic motherhood are used by the State to police women and families. Recent tropes of ideal motherhood include "the Soccer Mom" and "the Tiger Mom." These motherhood constructs give form to middle class anxieties about the competing and conflicting responsibilities imposed on women—propositions that make ideal motherhood elusive.³

Instead of focusing on the ideal mother, Cammett turns to a trope of stigmatized motherhood: the welfare queen. Her work reveals the construct's role in shaping the identities of poor women, as well as its role in shaping the self-perception of a far larger group of citizens, ones not normally associated with this construct. In this endeavor, Cammett expertly weaves together history and psychology to reveal a disturbing truth: The welfare queen construct exerts disciplinary power over us all, regardless of gender and class position.

Cammett begins by showing how constructs deployed in policy discussions to describe poor mothers reduce empathy and cultivate disinterest in, and resentment of, the poor. Instead of examining the structural conditions that produce poverty, we create villains like the welfare queen—a woman who irresponsibly bears children and has little interest in anything besides public consumption. Villainized figures like the welfare queen become easy targets in a neo-liberal state that emphasizes personal responsibility. As Cammett explains, the result is punitive policies that punish poor parents for their "irresponsible" choices, rather than an exploration of the material effects these policies have on poor children or an examination of the structural conditions that make it difficult for poor parents to support their children. According to Cammett, these realities include the economic shock of post-industrialization in urban areas; shrinking blue-collar employment; white flight from urban centers, and the emergence of mass criminalization. Importantly, these conditions affect a large swath of poor citizens, but the welfare queen stalls analysis of how to address these fundamental broad-scale social

problems.

Following in the tradition of scholars like [Ange-Marie Hancock](#)⁴ and [Dorothy Roberts](#),⁵ Cammett shows how the welfare queen construct has evolved through different historical periods to shape the public's views about poor mothers. Her analysis is stunning. As she shows, the construct endures even though traditional welfare has been dismantled and poor mothers are subject to extremely punitive "Temporary Assistance to Needy Families" programs under the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Although the policy problem that created the welfare queen has withered away, the construct continues to shape policy debates.

Cammett's work is also notable for her insightful description of the role implicit bias plays in stigmatizing the welfare queen in the post racial era. As she explains, although it is never stated explicitly, the welfare queen is always black by implication. In this way, politicians can tap into residual racial bias to further galvanize anger and frustration against poor women, a result that compromises the economic wellbeing of poor whites, who constitute the largest share of welfare recipients. In this regard, Cammett's work is a primer on one of the key ways racial bias operates in policy debates in the post racial era—by invoking an already racialized figure to cue racial resentment and anger. As Cammett shows, even when the construct is not invoked explicitly, the welfare queen is the metaphoric backdrop that structures our understanding of poor women and their families.

Cammett's most significant contribution in this piece is her description of how the welfare queen construct disciplines men, and its corollary implications for fatherhood and masculinity. As she details, the welfare queen has an equally villainized partner, the "deadbeat dad," and this construct is used to punish poor men for their inability to provide economically for their children. Originally a construct used to sanction middle class fathers who failed to care for children after divorce, the deadbeat dad has taken on a new role in more recent policy discussions. In the era of the welfare queen, the construct changed to villainize men that "refused" to take on a breadwinner role because of moral and cultural dysfunction. The State responded to this new deadbeat dad by chasing down poor fathers and forcing them to honor their child support obligations. However, this approach ignores the fact of widespread underemployment and unemployment in poor communities because of structural changes in the job market. On this account, the deadbeat dad construct ensures that there is no "meaningful political and policy discourse about what distinguishes deadbeat [Dads] from "deadbroke" [Dads]—those who simply don't have the ability to pay." Moreover, in an era of mass incarceration, child support enforcement laws can sometimes result in jail time for poor deadbroke fathers, ironically making it more difficult for them to discharge their support obligations.

Finally, Cammett's article explores one ironic detail of welfare policy that should engage all family law scholars and feminists, even those not specifically interested in anti-poverty initiatives. She shows how the State works out the conflicting obligations it imposes on all working mothers through the body of the welfare queen. Welfare mothers cannot be ideal workers and ideal mothers simultaneously because the ideal worker, by definition, prioritizes wage labor over family. By contrast, the ideal mother prioritizes family over wage labor. The state repeatedly rehearses and naturalizes this double bind by villainizing poor mothers and low-income mothers. However, the same critiques are made in muted form of all working mothers today.

Cammett's work is essential reading because it allows us to move beyond wordless anxiety about the welfare queen to an articulate analysis of the stereotypes and punitive programs that continue to be directed at poor women. Her work is key to the development of smarter anti-poverty programs. However, her work is also important because it provides a sneak preview of critiques that can be launched at all mothers or, alternatively, at the poor more generally. She reminds us that the State works out its policy frustrations on the most vulnerable before mobilizing them more broadly. She

teaches us that we should not be afraid of the welfare queen, rather we should be afraid for the poor women trapped by this construct. She reminds us that we should continually monitor and critically assess the State's depiction of and response to the most needy among us.

1. [The Return of the Welfare Queen](#), 22 **A.U.J. Gender, Social Policy, & the Law** 247 (2014).
2. [Cheating Welfare: Public Assistance and the Criminalization of Poverty](#), (2011).
3. [A video presentation of Cammett presenting her piece](#) is available as part of the recent conference *Reframing the Welfare Queen: Feminist and Critical Race Theory Alternatives to Existing Poverty Discourse*. Conference proceedings will be published in 2015 in an upcoming issue of the USC Interdisciplinary Law Journal.
4. [The Politics of Disgust and the Public Identity of the Welfare Queen](#), (2004).
5. [Welfare Reform and Economic Freedom: Low-Income Mothers' Decision about Work at Home and in the Market](#), 44 **Santa Clara L. Rev.** 1029 (2004).

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