

*'To injure no man,
but to bless all mankind'*

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Bush welfare agenda – married to a myth

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LIKE most mothers who have ever received public assistance, I was led to the welfare rolls by domestic violence. At the time, I was a single, pregnant mother cleaning houses for \$4.75 an hour. I was homeless after fleeing an abusive relationship. Welfare enabled me to provide food and shelter for my newborn daughter and myself – and leave my batterer for good. And I'm not alone in this experience. Research shows that up to 83 percent of welfare mothers in my home state of California have experienced domestic violence.

So as a single mother who survived domestic violence, and as someone who now works daily with single mothers, I'm deeply concerned about President Bush's "Healthy Marriage Plan," which would spend \$1.5 billion in federal and state funds to marry poor mothers off the welfare rolls.

Clearly, marriage is not a solution for mothers who face domestic violence, as I once did.

The president's proposal is deeply flawed in other ways, as well. It will increase weekly work requirements for parents on welfare – requiring them to do 40 hours of "work activities" each week in exchange for their welfare benefits. Yet, at the same time, Mr. Bush's proposed budget for 2005 slashes child-care funding for 300,000 low-income kids. Given the high unemployment rate, his proposal is likely to force states to create massive "workfare" programs to meet increased work participation rates – at a cost of \$11 billion to the states.

But my deepest concern with the proposal is that it ignores hard truths: For many low-income parents in my state, neither marriage nor work is enough to get their families off welfare, let alone out of poverty.

In 2003, more than 130,000 parents in California reached their five-year lifetime limit on welfare, and were cut off public assistance for the rest of their lives – even though up to 92 percent of them were working and playing by the rules. Clearly, work requirements haven't helped their families get off welfare. Nor is a marriage license a ticket off welfare, even for mothers who have not been abused. The fact is, the majority of California parents who reached their lifetime limit on welfare last year were already in two-parent families.

Marriage can't solve poverty as long as one parent is relegated to a low-wage, dead-end job while

the other stays home and takes care of the children at no cost to the state – as is the experience of two-parent welfare families in California.

But perhaps that is precisely the point.

Promoting marriage may sound reasonable, but the reality is that welfare reform was never really about helping poor families. After all, reducing poverty was not one of the goals of the 1996 welfare reform bill signed by President Clinton, but reducing welfare case loads and promoting low-wage work and marriage were.

So what is President Bush's agenda for this second round of welfare reform? To take the American family and social policy back to a time when women were supposed to get married, but not educated – a time to which few of us, on or off welfare, want to

return. If the president really cared about poor children and families, he'd spend that \$1.5 billion to provide shelter, counseling, and services for mothers and children fleeing domestic violence; he'd require every state to allow education and training as a welfare-to-work activity; and he'd guarantee affordable, quality childcare to every parent who moves from welfare to work. But under welfare reform as we know it, single mothers are offered cash bonuses to get married, and forced to quit school or be cut off the welfare rolls.

WHEN I consider the president's proposal for welfare reauthorization, I feel fortunate that when I was a battered, homeless single mother on welfare, it was *before* welfare reform.

Unlike most parents on public assistance today, welfare helped me go to school, earn my college degree, and get a job that pays me enough to support my family. Today, I pay more than \$14,000 in taxes annually – almost double what I used to make working in a low-wage, dead-end job. And I've paid back – several times over – the investment that welfare made in my family.

If I had waited for a man to marry me off welfare, not only would I still be a single mother, but my family would still be poor. My education, not marriage, got my family out of poverty.

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**Marrying
women off is
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