

Does *Saving Bernice* Mean She Gets *Nickel and Dimed*? The Two Sides of the Welfare-to-Work Debate

Nickel and Dimed: On How the Poor Make Money by Barbara Ehrenreich

Barbara Ehrenreich. New York: Metropolitan Books. 2001. 221 pages.

Saving Bernice: How Welfare Reform Works by Jody Raphael

Jody Raphael. Boston: Northeastern University Press. 2000. 184 pages.

Reviewed by Cory

Barbara Ehrenreich says that her initial objective in

“mollified many economists but do not impress me When I persisted in my carping to economists

As Ehrenreich indicates, neither threshold is attainable on wages alone. Government income transfers, however, have a substantial effect on poverty rates. Mark Levitan and Robin Gluck found that among working single mothers in 1999-2001, 36.5 percent did not earn enough to escape poverty through their wages alone. Once government transfer payments were included, however, only 14.2 percent had incomes below the official poverty threshold.⁶

To further illustrate the powerful effect of transfer payments, let us take a single head of household holding a \$6.25 per hour

Raphael's link between welfare and domestic violence is rejected by most anti-poverty advocates. For them, single mothers are isolated women who must struggle against an uncaring system. As Joan Meier noted:

“[E]mphasis on the values and attitudes which lead to abuse and the need for moral education of perpetrators . . . is anathema to anti-poverty activists who preach the structural and socioeconomic causes of the ills of the poor and see any talk of moral or dysfunctional behavior of the poor as a form of blaming the victim. . . . Such ‘poverty progressives’ are fueled by their belief that both the causes and cures for poverty are social, economic, and political, but not behavioral.”¹¹

By claiming that welfare traps abused women in poverty, Raphael threatens core beliefs of most advocates for the poor. When forced to acknowledge the existence of domestic violence,

- ⁷ Bound, John and Richard Freeman. "What Went Wrong? The Erosion of the Relative Earnings of Young Black Men during the 1980s," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 107.2 (1992): 201-232.
- ⁸ Kim Clark and Lawrence Summers, "The Dynamics of Youth Unemployment," in *The Youth Labor Market Problem*, ed. Richard Freeman and David Wise, 199-230, University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- ⁹ Kathryn Edin, "Few Good Men: Why Poor Women Don't Marry or Remarry," *American Prospect* 11.4 (2000): 28-32.
- ¹⁰ Randy Albelda and Chris Tilly, "Moving Beyond 'Get a Job': What Really Welfare Reform Would Look Like." In *Working Poor Policy: Regulating the Open Economy*, edited by Mary King, 15-44. University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- ¹¹ Joan Meier "Domestic Violence, Character, And Social Change In The Welfare Reform Debate." *Labour Policy* 19 (Apr 1997): 223, 228.
- ¹² Ibid., 229.
- ¹³ Linda Gordon's praise of Ruth Brandwein (editor) *Behind the Scenes of Reform*, found on its publisher's website: <http://www.sagepub.com/book.aspx?pid=4135>.
- ¹⁴ Heather Boushey, Chauna Brocht and Jared Bernstein, *Redesigning the Safety Net* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, July 2001).
- ¹⁵ For two such tax reforms, see Robert Cherry and Max Sawicky, "And Now for Something Completely Different: Progressive Tax Cuts that Republicans Can Support." *Commentary* 44(May/June 2001): 43-60; Adam Carasso, Jeff Rohaly, and C. Eugene Steuerle, *Reforming the American Economy*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 2003.

Robert Cherry, Professor of Economics, Brooklyn College, author of Who Gets the Good Jobs? Combatting Race and Gender Disparities (Rutgers University Press).

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