

Flipping the Script on Poverty

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“This society makes it illegal to be poor; this society does not recognize, support or legitimize the ‘work’ involved in raising children; and this society is quick to accuse poor mothers of the crime of being poor rather than recognize the heroism of their survival.” —welfareQUEENS

The Bay Area-based welfareQUEENS, a project of the [_POOR News Network](#), are fighting back against a system that dehumanizes poor mothers—with poetry, theater, and any other media tool they can access.

welfareQUEENS began in a kitchen in San Francisco’s Mission District when a group of poor women who knew each other from anti-poverty organizing gathered around a table to share their personal stories.

One recalled how the welfare system had invaded her family’s life in the 1970s, and how the same struggles against poverty and racism persist today. Another had been told she made a few dollars too many to qualify for public assistance while struggling to care for a disabled elder. A third described the hardships she experienced in seeking health care through the Medi-Cal system.

They met monthly in that kitchen for almost two years. To facilitate the gatherings, they provided each other with food, childcare, and other supports. Over time, they started calling themselves the welfareQUEENS, a name coined by founder Tiny, aka Lisa Gray-Garcia, and turned their stories into a scripted play. Today, they perform in settings ranging from street protests to classrooms. Since their debut stage performance in summer 2007, they’ve expanded to become a multimedia art, education, and advocacy project. Their mission is to radically alter the public discourse around poverty.

The welfareQUEENS describe their target audience as “everybody.” As member Laure McElroy says, “The kinds of attacks that happen to us really trickle up... to unions, women of all classes, [and others].” After developing their stories in dynamic peer-education workshops that take into account members’ difficult and unpredictable schedules, they perform in venues ranging from small theaters to college campuses.

Most discussions of poverty highlight the voices of policymakers and academics instead of those who have experienced poverty firsthand. Insisting that their life experiences make them the true poverty scholars, welfareQUEENS tries to “deconstruct pejorative myths [about poor women] through submitting our own ‘true myths,’” says McElroy.

The core of welfareQUEENS is seven “lead mamas” (aka “superbabymamas”): Gray-Garcia and McElroy along with Dharma, Jewnbug, Queen Andi, Tracey Faulkner, and Vivian Hain. It’s a multiracial, woman-led project, but men and children are welcome to

participate in both onstage and behind-the-scenes roles. The group encourages their participation as part of their mission to transcend oppression by working across genders, generations, and other identity categories.

Through performance and media, the group aims to expose and end the criminalization of poor people. “Reagan was able to coalesce the entire country against us and criminalize us as these people who were here just to fraud the system,” Gray-Garcia says, recalling the 1980s political specter of the lazy, multiple-Cadillac-owning “welfare queen.” A generation later, she continues, “with global climate change and [poor people around the world] being called a security threat, that’s only getting worse.” (*ColorLines* has reported on the recent arrests of thousands of homeless people in L.A. to facilitate gentrification, a phenomenon occurring in cities nationwide.)

Their economic struggles extend into their art. welfareQUEENS believe that “as poor people, we must be paid ... for the art and media and scholarship and research we produce,” says Gray-Garcia, “as opposed to being studied [or] researched and talked at—or only seen as good for domestic, secretarial, or security work.”

Yet their critique of traditional philanthropy and social-service institutions makes them unlikely recipients of foundation and public funding. A small grant from the City College of San Francisco’s Our Stories fund supported their first stage performance, but the bulk of welfareQueen’s funding comes from small individual donations.

The group has taken their message from the stage to the airwaves, producing a monthly radio series aired on Berkeley’s KPFA community radio station. Recent shows have focused on California’s budget crisis. Gray-Garcia explains, “Mama revolutionary researchers are feeling these budget cuts firsthand, [so we’ve] been documenting poor people’s struggle to resist the budget cuts and how they’re impacting us.”

The group has called California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's policies a form of “child abuse”—reversing a charge often levied against poor mothers in the child welfare system. Gray-Garcia asks, “Why are poor folks caught up on child-abuse charges, [while Schwarzenegger] can say he’s gonna cut off the only source of support for poor families?” welfareQUEENS will soon post a series of [video narratives online at PNN-TV](#). And they’re creating a video game in which a character named Super Baby Mama battles Child Protective Services—an institution with which welfareQUEENS are all too familiar—with support from El Mosquito, a panhandler by day and superhero by night who speaks 37 indigenous languages.

As they seek to influence public perception and public policy, the welfareQUEENS are finally putting a spotlight on women who refuse to be ignored any longer. “We are educating folks to put together the realities we deal with and how they correlate with policy,” Hain says. “Policy makers are not educated, and tend to demonize lives like our own. We flip the script: this could be you, this could be someone in your life – this is a gift, our knowledge.”

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