Challenges to Advancement among Former Welfare Recipients

“A job, a better job, a career . . . ” The catchphrase of Michigan’s Work First program implies that once welfare recipients gain a toehold on the employment ladder and continue to accumulate work experience, their wages will rise and their jobs will be better. However, the appropriateness of this metaphor in summing up welfare recipients’ employment trajectories is open to question. Research like the WES demonstrates that many welfare recipients have significant and sometimes multiple barriers to employment. The more such challenges a recipient has, the less likely she is to work at all, let alone climb the rungs of the employment ladder. While a good number of recipients do work, as we see in Chapter 2, much of that employment is unsteady, perhaps disrupting their wage progression. Even among those who are employed steadily, not all experience wage growth; recall that about a quarter of the WES sample stayed in “poverty-wage jobs” over the entire survey period or were in them at the end (see Table 3.3).

However, the conceptual models of welfare recipients’ employment paths and of the influential factors leave out one very important consideration: the calculations that women themselves make when thinking about what jobs to take. As we see in the previous chapter, the characteristics that women believe make a job good or bad go far beyond the pay and benefits. In order to obtain more insight into the decision-making process around employment and advancement, I again look to the qualitative interview data, examining the following questions: 1) How do women perceive their own opportunities for and challenges to employment advancement? 2) What do they think about the place of education and training as it relates to upward mobility? 3) What role do family responsibilities play in women’s decisions about when to take new jobs and when to participate in educational programs?
As discussed earlier, descriptions of opportunity within the low-wage labor market often invoke colorful metaphors, in particular, the characterizations of jobs as “dead-end.” However, many women we interviewed did not view their jobs in this way. When we asked them whether or not opportunities for advancement existed in their current positions, more than half believed that they could progress. Nine women noted that within their companies a lower-level employee could be promoted to supervisor. Indeed, three of the women interviewed—LaVonda, Mishon, and Olivia—pointed to their own promotions as evidence of opportunities for upward mobility in their places of work. Of course, perceptions of advancement are always relative. Mishon’s promotion to a supervisor of housekeeping in the hotel in which she worked did not seem to have any raise in pay attached to it, and she continued to make barely above the minimum wage.

Offers of promotion were not always accepted, however. Other women said that, while supervisor positions were available, and some had been offered this job, they did not want to move up into this role. Several said that the extra tasks and responsibilities associated with supervision were not worth the relatively small increase in pay. Other women contended that being a supervisor entailed giving up certainty over one’s schedule. Caroline, a registered nurse, had been asked by the hospital’s management on numerous occasions to take on a supervisory position, but she always declined. She told us, “I’ve been asked to take [the supervisor job] at least six times by management. Other people on the floor, my co-workers, they keep encouraging me to take that job because they feel I would be a very good unit manager, that I could run a unit. I don’t want to do that, and the only reason I don’t want to do it—because it would be an advancement in pay [and] it’s day hours, which is good because I could work, like, 8 to 4, the latest I’d be out is 4:30—but the bad part about it is you have to be on call, and I don’t like the on-call thing. Because if another nurse calls in and that’s your day to be on call or that’s your weekend to be on call, no matter what shift it is, you have to get up and go in and cover. So that’s the disadvantage to that. Other than that, I probably would take the position, because like I said it would be a great advancement in pay. But I just can’t get used to
the idea of being on call because I believe in my time and when I’m off, I’m off. I don’t want to get up and come in and work for nobody unless I choose to. I don’t want it to be a mandatory thing that I have to.”

Quite a few women we interviewed told us that there were career ladders within the organization, but various considerations kept them from applying for upper-level jobs. For example, Jackie said that in order to take a current opening for a higher-paying job, she would have to commute 35 minutes each way to another store owned by the grocery chain for which she worked. Compared to her current commute of 10 minutes, this trip was much too long. Also, driving to the more distant store would mean that Jackie would not be around to see her daughter off to school in the morning. Other women noted that their workplaces offered them opportunities to participate in training that would lead to promotions or that their place of work would reimburse them for participation in outside education and training programs. Olivia, who worked for a bank, had gone through numerous classes offered by her company, allowing her to progress through the ranks and to take on additional responsibilities. Tia, a clerical employee in a hospital, was studying to become a physical therapist. The hospital reimbursed her for tuition. A couple of women, though, stated that while these opportunities existed in their places of employment, they had not taken advantage of them.

Several women reported that any opportunities for continued advancement were limited by their lack of seniority within the organization or by their level of education. That is, the organization posted job openings, and personnel could apply for higher-paying positions, but only after being employed for some length of time (two years in one case), with consideration for new positions based in part on seniority. For others, moves higher up the ladder required specific skills or certifications that they did not have. Cherie, a pharmacy technician, said that the only opportunity for a higher-paying job within the store where she worked was as a pharmacist, a job requiring a college education as well as additional schooling. While Cherie had completed high school as well as extra training programs, she could not advance beyond her current position, which paid just under $10 an hour.

In the last chapter we saw how many women experienced stress on the job, including problems with overbearing supervisors who sometimes played favorites or engaged in discriminatory behavior. While these experiences certainly contributed to unpleasant workplaces, at
least some women believed that favoritism within the organization was a limiting factor for advancement. Denise, an employee in a group home for the elderly and mentally disabled, was very clear that her opportunities to move up were quite constrained. When asked if she might ever get promoted to manager, she said, “This is a family-run type business place, so you got to know somebody. If you don’t know nobody, you ain’t going nowhere. If they cousin or son or girlfriend come working for the place, they’ll be a manager in three months. Never been a manager, never had any experience, never worked in a group home, and this is the type of thing you have to worry about.” Other women told similar stories about the lack of promotion opportunities in family-run businesses. Some said that the only employees who moved up were those who were particular favorites of the bosses. Ellen, who worked for a clothing store, said, “I had a chance to go for the assistant manager job and she [my supervisor] made sure she handpicked who she wanted, which I don’t think is fair. I think the person who is qualified should have got the job, because this new assistant manager can’t cut it. See, I’m doing more than she [the assistant manager] is. The assistant manager is just incapable of doing what we do.” Whether or not these perceptions were true, many women believed that within their current jobs, upward mobility was elusive.

We also asked the 32 women we interviewed to assess whether or not they had advanced over the last five years (the time period roughly corresponding to the WES survey data collection). We kept this question rather open ended; for example, we wanted women to tell us about how they perceived their own employment trajectories and to talk about the factors they considered in making judgments about their progression. Nearly two-thirds (21) of qualitative respondents believed that they had advanced, at least in some aspects, while 9 believed they had not. However, women’s answers about whether or not they had moved ahead were filled with discrepancies. For example, 8 of the women who told us that they had advanced cited increased pay and promotions as the reasons behind their answers. However, among these 8, 4 had negative or little wage growth. Sheila, a 39-year-old mother of two, had recently taken an assembly job at a company that produced automobile parts. Although at first glance, one might imagine that a manufacturing job would be a big step up from her previous position as an aide in a nursing home, Sheila’s hourly wage only increased by 50¢ between
2001 and 2003 and was roughly the same as it had been in 1997. However, the 50¢ increase was noteworthy to Sheila, who also saw further opportunities for adding to her paycheck by learning to operate different types of machinery. It is also very likely that taking an auto-parts manufacturing job was a symbolic move upward for Sheila, even if the pay raise was not that large. Sheila said that she had always hoped to get a factory job, once very prevalent in the community, but now dwindling in number.

Others noted that they had gained new skills or had taken on additional responsibilities. Amanda started off performing routine clerical tasks at minimum wage for a small law firm but moved up to be the office manager. While her pay had risen to about $10 an hour, she still lacked health insurance and other benefits. However, she believed that the increased responsibility was noteworthy, saying, “I’ve advanced as far as getting more responsibility. We have to look at it [advancement] in different terms for me. So I’ve advanced in the level of responsibility I’ve been given . . . Pay—I’m sure that if they could afford to pay me more, they would. I truly think that the reason I don’t get paid more is because we’re small and because it’s what they can afford to keep the office going.” A dispatcher for a local transportation company that primarily served the elderly and disabled, Melanie turned down a promotion to a management position because it would have removed her from day-to-day interactions with customers. Her hourly wage remained mostly flat, but she still believed that she had advanced: “Even though I didn’t take the pay, it’s like I have something else higher. I guess just—I call it my little old ladies. You know, they’re just—I mean, my little old crew. That’s more important to me, seeing them get to their appointments.” As noted in the previous chapter, Melanie told us that she took her current job over another, higher-paying, offer, because the dispatcher’s position gave her an opportunity to help others.

Nine women were unequivocal about their lack of advancement. Their median wage growth over the six and a half years was about 2 percent total, or, in the words of Lorraine, a housekeeper in a hospital, “Just a few nickels and dimes more, that’s all.” Most of these women recognized that their pay had not increased. Some felt frustrated that they were doing the same type of work and that their jobs had not changed, but at least a couple put partial blame upon themselves. Toni, a mother of three teenagers, worked nine months out of the year for a local school,
providing help in the lunchroom and other teacher’s aide–related tasks. While believing this job to be ideal because the schedule allowed her to be at home during the same times as her children, she acknowledged that it had been at a cost. She said to us, “I’ve been at a standstill with my job, and some of it is my own—it is my fault because I could be doing something else, but I choose not to, like bus driving. I could have made time to be a bus driver [by taking training classes] and make more money and have my benefits.” Lorraine, a housekeeper, had applied for several different positions within the hospital and was passed over for all of them. She blamed her lack of education, saying, “It’s like I’m still stuck in the same position that I am, you know. I think they still looking for high school graduates and up, and I just ain’t that.”

FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Lorraine’s comment about employers wanting workers with high school diplomas and about the implications of her lacking a diploma on advancement raises the issue about the effect of further education and training on upward mobility. Advanced degrees and technical skills are of increasing value in our labor market (Murnane and Levy 1996). The multivariate analyses showed a relationship between lack of a high school education and downward employment transitions; not graduating or not having a GED increased the probability of moving into a poverty-wage job after first holding an above-poverty-wage job (see Figure 3.4). Nearly half of the women we interviewed in depth believed that their single largest challenge to advancing further was their insufficient education. Yet, state welfare systems moved away from assisting recipients in obtaining further schooling, even prior to the 1996 welfare reform. Once the law’s work requirements—and restrictions in allowing educational activities to count toward meeting the requirements—went into effect, few states provided help to recipients in going to school or participating in vocational training activities.

To the extent that women obtained additional training during the time they were in our study, they did it on their own and often while they were working. Table 6.1 shows the proportion of WES survey respondents who, between 1997 and 2003, participated in any of the fol-
lowing: GED or high school completion programs, vocational training programs, and/or work toward an associate’s, bachelor’s, or graduate degree. The bottom row of the table shows the percentage who participated in any of these educational/training activities.

As seen in the first column of data, more than half of all respondents in the survey reported that they had participated in some educational or training activity. Just under 30 percent enrolled in a vocational program or class, and 22 percent had taken college courses, while a much smaller number, 7.5 percent, participated in GED or high school completion activities. Important differences exist, though, between the types of activities and the educational attainment of the respondents when first surveyed in 1997. For example, and as would be expected, participation in GED preparation activities was much more common among those without a high school diploma, with 20 percent of those without this credential in 1997 reporting that they had taken steps toward obtaining a GED.² Among those who finished high school, additional training is fairly evenly split between vocational training and college classes. Although not shown in the table, taking college classes

### Table 6.1 Participation in Education and Training, 1997–2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>All WES wave 5 respondents (n = 536)</th>
<th>Wave 5 respondents without diploma/GED in 1997 (n = 160)</th>
<th>Wave 5 respondents with a high school diploma/GED in 1997 (n = 376)</th>
<th>Qualitative respondents (n = 32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GED/high school completion</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>20.0***</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>29.5***</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any education or training, 1997–2003</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>60.1*</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: *Difference between wave 5 respondents without a high school diploma/GED and with a high school diploma/GED is significant at p < 0.10. **Difference between wave 5 respondents without a high school diploma/GED and with a high school diploma/GED is significant at p < 0.01. Percentages in a particular column will not equal the proportion ever participating in education or training because it is possible that some respondents engaged in multiple activities.

SOURCE: Author’s tabulations from WES data.
was more common among those who already had some postsecondary education in 1997 (42.4 percent of the 172 respondents with additional education) compared to those who had finished high school only (18.6 percent of the 204 respondents completing high school). This suggests that those who were already more educationally advantaged were the ones most likely to attend college, although no significant differences appear by attendance at a vocational program. However, what the data do not show is completion of a program or a degree.

The last column of the table displays participation in these activities among qualitative sample members as reported in the surveys. However, some of these activities were missed. In total, 21 of the 32 women, when interviewed in depth, reported that they had engaged in some form of education and training activities. However, it is important to remember that few of these 32 women lacked high school diplomas when first interviewed in 1997, so it is not surprising that just 3 women participated in GED preparation activities. One of these women, Sierra, a 30-year-old mother of three, started a GED class but eventually dropped out of the program. Money to pay for child care was the major problem. “Like I said, I really didn’t have the money to pay a babysitter, and when you got kids, it costs money, you know, even to leave them for someone to watch them for a few hours. So, I just really didn’t have the money to do it anymore.”

Five of the women we spoke to in depth had previously reported in the survey that they had participated in vocational training activities, or, as the survey asked, “training for a specific job.” Further examination of the interview data indicates that much of this training consisted of seminars or classes specific to the employer. For example, several women who worked in food-related jobs were required to take food-safety classes, while others in the health field were required to be certified in CPR. While the skills and certifications achieved through these classes may help women get other, similar jobs, it is unlikely that this type of knowledge will lead to promotions or higher-paying employment elsewhere.

Eight women had attended college during the study period, and another woman had just enrolled when we interviewed her. Like those in the larger WES sample, these eight individuals tended to have completed high school and already had some postsecondary education under their belts when the study first started following them in late 1997.
Nevertheless, actual completion of these programs was slow going, as might be expected with their other commitments to work and family. Among the nine, only Caroline, a registered nurse, and Marie, a law enforcement officer, had finished their course work and received degrees. Another common trait shared by women who attended college was that most had boyfriends, husbands, or family members whom they could call upon for help. Marie, who had a child as a teenager, was a talented athlete who received a track-and-field scholarship to a school out of state. However, her athletic eligibility ran out before she completed her degree, and Marie found herself back in Michigan and on welfare. Within a short time, she was able to transfer to another four-year institution and eventually graduate, ending up as one of the highest-paid women in our study. Marie credited the support she received from her parents, which included babysitting for her daughter while she was in classes and studying, as crucial for her being able to get a bachelor’s degree.

Regina, Amanda, and Tia were currently enrolled in programs. Regina was taking her college courses online, which allowed her more flexibility in her schedule. Nevertheless, she received significant support from both her cohabiting partner and her other family members. Her boyfriend helped with the bills, her father bought her a car, her grandmother watched her children, and her mother provided “constant moral support . . . telling me I can do it, reassuring me.” Kathleen, who was about to return to school full time, felt financially secure in leaving her job as a day care provider because her husband worked in construction with a very good salary. Tia, although recently married, did not have such support and believed that her grades suffered as a result. She emphasized that her children’s education came before hers, saying, “You’ve got to make sure they’re doing good in school. If I’ve got to drop what I’m doing at school and miss a class to make sure they’re getting what they need in school, that’s the challenge.” Tia was making mostly Cs in her own classes and worried that her grade point average would not be high enough to get into the next stage of the training program.

Even if welfare program administrators downplayed the role of education in employment advancement, most women we interviewed believed education was essential in that respect. Further, most made a sharp distinction between degree and other types of educational pro-
grams. Before enrolling in an associate’s program, Kathleen had earlier completed a certificate in medical technology. In the end, she said that the certificate did not help her advance because she believed employers give an associate’s degree more weight when making hiring decisions. She said, “It’s the associate’s degree. Yeah, my sister called it something—the initiative to stay for two years—where when she hires people she wants them to go to college because they know they’ll last and they stuck it out, so she looks at that [an associate’s degree] more than she looks at a certificate, cause that’s in and out, you’re out of there. Which is how I looked at it, but now I don’t cause now I wish I would have done the associate’s.”

Women who engaged in vocational training programs tended to have mixed evaluations of their usefulness. While the majority who participated believed that training was useful, for the most part this was because they thought it helped them perform their current jobs better, not because it opened up new opportunities for them. The assessment of LaVonda, a fast-food worker, is typical of this. She had taken a number of classes related to food preparation that were offered by the local health department. She said, “It [the class] helped me on my job . . . to know more about the food—the safeties and the precautions on food, ’cause foods are supposed to be a certain temperature, and all-raw foods can’t be mixed with ready-to-eat foods, stuff like that.”

Furthering their education was a goal of more than half of the women we interviewed, although we detected considerable variation in terms of the drive to do this. For example, as noted, a number of women were enrolled in programs, while several others had researched the various schools and offerings available in the area. Shanice was very close to completing her associate’s degree when we talked to her and was starting to look into bachelor’s programs. Other women knew that their lack of credentials or skills was holding them back and believed that they should return to school. As Denise, a nurse’s aide, said, “If you don’t have a high school diploma or some kind of degree, you’re going to be cleaning up or cleaning somebody up all your life.” However, when pressed to articulate the steps they were taking to achieve this goal, the individuals did not know how they would go back to school or cited real barriers to furthering their education.

Lorraine, a single mother of two, is a good illustration of these challenges. Lorraine talked at length about how bad experiences in high
school made it difficult for her to want to enroll in a GED program. She said, “I think it was my 9th grade year I left [Michigan], and I went to Chicago, and the credits was different here than they was there . . . I had finished the 10th grade, I went to the 11th grade, and I happened to see my report card this particular day, and you know how you had to have so many credits to graduate? I looked at my credits and I’m like, God, I don’t have that many credits! . . . So come to find out when I left Michigan and came to Chicago they had made me start all over and I didn’t know that.” Lorraine said that she was particularly hurt that her mother never went to the school to try to talk with officials about getting her credits from Michigan accepted. In the end, she dropped out at 16 and shortly afterward became pregnant with her first child.

A few years later, Lorraine enrolled in a computer training program but found her confidence greatly shaken. “At the computer school I had to do this paper. I wrote this paper and I thought to myself, ‘I did real good.’ You know, I took my time. I end up getting a C and that kinda disappointed me. I’m like, ‘Wait a minute, I put all this time, and wrote this paper and did this and that, and I looked through the books and I tried to use the right words and this is all I get!’ See, that’s a downfall I have, that goes back to saying that I never had anybody to really support me, and to say, ‘Lorraine, you can do it.’”

Age presented at least a perceived challenge for some women. For Ellen, who was in her late thirties, the thought of having to do math after being out of school for 20 years was quite daunting. When we met with her, she was contemplating starting an apprentice program at a local manufacturing company. However, she would have to take a test upon completion of the apprenticeship in order to be hired as a full-time employee. She showed the study guide to Amber, the interviewer, saying, “I haven’t had none of this. I’m dumbfounded here . . . sometimes I feel like it’s just too late [to go back to school].” Additionally, Ellen noted that, as she had aged, her health problems had increased. Several years earlier she had had a heart attack, which lowered her energy level. While she professed a desire to return to school (over and above the apprentice program), she doubted that she could physically handle the demands of work, school, and family.

Chapter 2 documents the high prevalence of certain personal and family challenges that many have conventionally called “barriers to employment.” Ostensibly, some of these impediments could be removed
through participation in education and training. For example, a woman with no high school diploma and limited work experience might see her labor market prospects improve if she were able to complete a vocational program that provided some on-the-job training. However, similar to employment barriers, other constraints might interfere with going back to school. Women like Ellen who had physical limitations may not have the vigor to go to work and to school. Individuals with mental health problems may likewise lack the energy to participate in school, or, as was true for Lorraine, may be plagued with doubts about their ability to succeed in the classroom. Women with learning disabilities, particularly if undiagnosed or untreated, may not be able to function in traditional academic settings.

Other women had thought about returning to school, but demands on the household’s income made them hesitant to do so. Johnetta was trying to put aside money so that she could take classes and obtain her real estate license. However, her son was attending a four-year, private college, and she did not believe that she had extra funds to pursue training for herself. Like Ellen, Johnetta worried that her health (a thyroid condition) would prevent her from working and going to school at the same time. Wendy was waiting for her children and stepchildren to finish their high school and postsecondary education before pursuing her own interests. Not only would this free up money, but her responsibilities as a parent would be lessened.

Concerns about their children’s well-being were another main reason that women put off participating in education and training. Amanda, an office manager of a law firm, represents this struggle. She said, “My choices are to take night classes and not be around the kids, which I don’t like. They’re teenagers—they need me at home now more than they ever did. My son’s moved out, I have daughters. My youngest has a boyfriend now, so I don’t want to be one of those moms and then complain later on, well, what happened? If I take classes during the day, I’m missing work, which is my paycheck, so I can’t do that because my paychecks are lower. I can’t do that.”

This tension between motherhood and career advancement opportunities, whether it be decisions to return to school or choices women make about upward movement on the job, emerged as perhaps the most striking common feature across interviews. Issues of work-family balance receive much attention in the popular media, with the coverage,
as in the *New York Times*’ articles cited at the beginning of this book, typically focusing on middle- and upper-middle-class women and the decisions they make about pursuing careers versus spending time with children. However, we found numerous examples of this same tension among lower-wage, working single mothers.

**CHOICES ABOUT ADVANCEMENT AND THE ROLE OF MOTHERHOOD**

Juggling employment and parenting is never an easy proposition, particularly for single parents. Trying to add another commitment, such as school, is often more than can be managed. For the vast majority of women we interviewed, some sort of balance had been struck in their lives, and many seemed unwilling to risk disrupting their schedules by returning to school and/or taking a different job. In large part this was because of their children.

For some women, decisions about employment advancement were tied to concerns that have been previously articulated in the literature about work and welfare (Edin and Lein 1997). For example, one woman worried about what might happen if she was not at home to monitor her children’s behavior, particularly since her oldest child had gotten into trouble when unsupervised. Toni, a teacher’s aide, believed it was very important to have a work schedule that matched her children’s. She said, “My kids are teenagers, and having teenagers, I think a parent needs to be at home when they’re home because they get carried away . . . I experienced that already with my oldest son, so I don’t want to make that same mistake with these two.” Other women feared that, without their supervision at home, their teenage daughters would become pregnant.

Problems with child care, including finding reliable and affordable services, have also been commonly cited concerns in studies focusing on women in the low-wage labor market. While child care problems forced Sierra to drop out of a GED preparation class, for most women in the qualitative study, arranging child care was not an issue. In fact, most women were like Toni and had school-age and teenage children. Despite not needing formal child care, these women expressed a strong
wish to spend time with their children and to participate in their activities. This desire sometimes got in the way of further advancement. Jackie did not apply for a promotion because it would mean transferring to a more distant store. She explained how her daughter’s activities and schedule played a role in her employment decisions. She said, “If it [the job] was in my store, I probably would [apply], but if it was somewhere else I just can’t do it right now because of my nine-year-old . . . I’d have to get up earlier, and I ain’t got nobody here to get my daughter, you know . . . And usually I have a lot to deal with . . . I do help out in Girl Scouts, I’m a coleader. My daughter’s very, very busy, and it’s just like trying to participate in her life and her stuff. She’s into this science project—we’re so far behind on that. I’ve got to get that together. And then, like, next week, Saturday, on my day off, I’ve got to go pick up $700 worth of Girl Scout cookies and put them in my Blazer . . . But, that makes it kind of hard, I mean, working, because there’s so much stuff going on in her life and sometimes I can’t be at everything, and that kind of upsets me.”

Similar to findings in recent work by Edin and Kefalas (2005), my research shows that women place a high value on being a mother. Based on interviews with young women in inner-city neighborhoods, Edin and Kefalas propose that poor women derive much meaning out of life from bearing children, perhaps in large part because, unlike middle-class and upper-middle-class individuals, “rewarding careers and professional identities [are not] . . . available” to them (p. 206). In many ways, the women in our sample are the older sisters of those interviewed by Edin and Kefalas. They are working, and their children are older, but their values have not changed.

Anita, a fast-food employee who had refused promotions to manager, talked about how working too much had a detrimental effect on her friend’s children. She said, “It’s like these days if you’re a single parent and you’re the mother that’s taking care of the household—like right now, I have a friend and her boyfriend helps out somewhat but not really, so she has to be the breadwinner of the house. And she’s doing that, but it’s hurting the kids. One of them, who is my godchild, well, she’s the same age as my son, she’s 7 or 8, but she can barely read. And it’s like when her mama get home, she’s tired. It’s hard for her to spend the time, to take the time out that—I guess that might be somewhat of an excuse, too, for her, but it’s like if she wasn’t working as hard
or didn’t have to do as much, maybe she could spend time with her to help with learning how to read things because that’s important, that’s real important . . . It seems like if she would have had more time then it would have been better for the kids instead of having to go out and do all that [work]. I know we bring things on to ourselves by having kids early and young, but still, you still have to raise your kids rather than [them] raising their selves or somebody else raising them.” While recognizing that a choice was made to have children at a younger age and as an unmarried woman, Anita firmly believed that, once children are there, mothers have the responsibility for their well-being.

In fact, one-third of the women we interviewed, when asked about their greatest challenges to further advancement, said that responsibilities to their children prevented them from progressing. A number of women believed that, once their children were grown, they would be able to devote time to themselves and would be able to advance. Amanda, the office manager and mother of three children, represents this view. She said, “A lot of my time that I could devote to education and to work, I choose to spend on my children, and that’s temporary. Once the kids are grown, I won’t have any real reasons to keep me from growing and moving ahead.” Sierra held similar views, noting that her purpose for working now was not to advance but to provide for her children: “Well, it’s my family and kids right now. It [work] ain’t just for me, basically right now it’s for the kids. I’ll have my life later. So you know, basically it’s the kids for me right now.” Of course, putting children before job advancement did mean that, generally, the family’s income remained low.

On the other hand, even if they turned down higher-paying jobs, many women were keenly aware of being the sole breadwinner of their families. While they might want to spend more time with their children and had found positions that allowed them greater flexibility to do so, they also knew that ultimately they were responsible for their family’s economic and overall well-being. In addition to being the exclusive parent in the house (and in many cases, the sole parent involved in their children’s lives), they also were the only person working, the one who paid all of the bills, and who made sure food was in the house and meals were prepared. Several women invoked the same metaphor to describe this situation, saying that they felt an incredible weight on their shoulders, knowing that the full burden of supporting their families fell
on them. Barbara, a 32-year-old woman who managed a trucking company, summed up her feelings by saying, “It gets stressful, taking care of everything, being both mom and dad and then having to work.”

Perhaps as a result, many women expected their children to help out quite a bit around the house. About a third of all women interviewed, when asked in what ways their family supported them as working mothers, noted that their children did at least some housework. Certain children were reported to play a more significant role in the running of the home. A number of women told us that their children prepared dinner at least some nights during the week. Shanice was one of these individuals; she said that her 14-year-old daughter could cook anything in Shanice’s repertoire and frequently had dinner ready when she returned home from her job as a transportation aide.

Despite help from their children, most women reported that the majority of the housework, as well as the cooking, was ultimately their job. Arlie Hochschild (1989) has called this phenomenon the “second shift.” As Hochschild notes, the growth of mothers in the paid labor force has generally resulted in women having another load of housework and related chores once their paid job has ended. Denise recognized that she had such a second shift, saying, “You go to work [and] a lot of times you think when you leave work your job is done. But you a mother [and] your first job is done, [but] you’ve got to go home and do your second job.” Also, the expectations of that second job are great. In The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood, Hays (1996) contends that an ideology of motherhood has arisen that stresses “emotionally demanding, financially draining, labor-consuming child rearing” just at the time that women are in the paid labor force in record numbers (p. 4). So, not only does a second shift exist, Hays says, but its demands are even greater. It is not enough to be a parent: Hays says one needs to engage in “intensive mothering,” investing in children’s needs by providing them opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities and by closely monitoring their development, as many of the women in our study reported to be doing. While Hochschild argues for a more equitable distribution of household labor between men and women, such an arrangement would be of little use to the women in our study. As single parents, no other adult is around to help. Caroline summed up her situation this way: “I don’t have that spouse to say, ‘Well, honey, you know what, I just can’t handle this today. You take care of it.’ There’s nobody
but me to take care of it, I don’t have a choice. And that’s when it becomes really, really stressful, and there are days where you just want to put your head down and you just feel like crying.”

Many women experienced stress not only from their jobs but from the balancing act they were trying to maintain. Caroline was not alone in admitting to having periodic breakdowns or to feeling overwhelmed and very tired. More than a dozen women talked about how “stressed out” they were, trying to manage a full-time job along with being a parent. While having older children often eased the day care problem for many individuals, their sons and daughters were active in sports and other after-school activities. Many mothers also wanted a better life for their children and closely tracked their progress in school. Having a job that allowed time off to attend parent-teacher conferences was very important for a number of the women in our study. Johnetta told us that in addition to her full-time job on the line, she volunteered at least twice a week at her younger son’s school so that she could talk with his teachers and see how he was doing. Johnetta’s older son was a sophomore at a prestigious private university, and she wanted the same opportunities for his brother. Johnetta herself had never finished college. Mishon, the hotel housekeeper, adamantly told us that “putting my kids in front of me is the most important thing to do,” meaning that, even if she was tired from a full day at work, she was still going to be available to take them to basketball practice or cook meals for them. The end result for women like Mishon, though, could be a great deal of stress.

However, women also told us that their children were their primary motivation for going to work and doing well on their jobs. Caroline told us that her children were “my sole purpose in doing everything I’ve done.” Similarly, Regina said that her children gave her “more power to go harder, faster, longer, to be able to provide for them.” Johnetta and Marie both had jobs that paid well, but with frequent evening shifts, taking them away from their children. Even though both women would have preferred to spend more time with their families, they said that a primary reason for staying on the job was to make sure their children had a higher quality of life. Johnetta said, “I want to help my son so that he can get a better job [as an adult] so that he won’t be struggling in this world like his mother is.”
If children were the focus of the present, what might the future hold? We asked women to talk about where they envisioned they would be and what they would be doing in five years. For most mothers we interviewed, this would be a time at which, to a large extent, their children would be grown and out of the house. Not surprisingly, given the importance the individuals placed on education, returning to school was a plan that more than half of the women had for themselves. The majority of women talked about going to school or completing other training programs. As noted earlier, some women were already slowly accruing credits toward a degree, a few were set to start programs, and additional respondents were actively gathering information on various such opportunities in the area. Other women told us that they wanted to be in school or to have finished school in the next five years, but when pressed for details, had fairly vague notions of what they might do, where they could enroll, and what they might realistically achieve. Sierra, who had in the past tried to take classes toward a GED, still had hopes of getting that certificate. She planned to do this as soon as her youngest child, aged 14, finished school. Beyond this time frame, though, Sierra lacked any firm plans. She wanted to go to college but didn’t know if a GED would gain her admission or if she would need a high school diploma.

Most women in our sample could probably be considered quite resourceful on a number of fronts: they were managing households and raising children, typically as the only adult, on relatively low incomes. However, some lacked a sense of what types of programs or services might be available to help them achieve their goals, or they did not want to use these services. When we asked women to tell us what kind of assistance—either from public or private sources—would enable them to fulfill their aspirations, many struggled to answer the question. It seemed as if it were difficult for some women to imagine that government could help them. When pressed, a number mentioned that assistance with paying for education and related expenses would be nice. A couple knew about loan and grant opportunities, such as the Pell Grant, a federal need-based aid program for lower- and middle-income stu-
dents attending undergraduate institutions. Two women had hopes of opening up their own day care centers and had started researching the types of assistance provided through the “4Cs,” the Michigan Community Coordinated Child Care Association, which provides both services and training to child care providers as well as referrals to parents searching for providers.

A more common answer to this question about help was for women to say that the only aid they needed (or perhaps wanted) was from their family and friends. For some, this support manifested itself in concrete services, such as family members who provided child care or friends who were willing to pick up children after school. For other women, the support wanted was emotional. Regina was taking college courses online when we interviewed her, and she cited her mother as providing “constant moral support” and reassurance when she found herself struggling with assignments. Four women very explicitly stated that they did not need any assistance.

Perhaps individuals’ prior experience with the welfare system shaped their sense that public entities were not a place to get help. Regarding the benefits of various public assistance programs, including TANF, Work First, Food Stamps, and Medicaid, women’s opinions varied, but in general, they were not altogether positive. A common complaint was that getting on public aid “just wasn’t worth the hassle” of multiple welfare office appointments and potentially rude treatment by welfare workers. A number of women noted that when welfare reform was implemented, they were sent to participate in the employment program, Work First, even though they already had jobs. It would not be a stretch to imagine that such inefficiency would not inspire great confidence in the public welfare system’s ability to help people achieve their goals.

Several women wanted to receive food stamps and/or Medicaid but were told that they earned too much. This was very perplexing to them, since they perceived their wages to be quite low. Jackie complained that now that her older children were teenagers with healthy appetites, she could not keep food in the house at all times. However, with a full-time job paying just under $10 an hour, Jackie was not eligible for the program. Anita, who made barely over the minimum wage and at most could hope to get 20 hours a week of work at her job, also was deemed ineligible because she had married and her husband worked. However,
she reported that more than half of his earnings went toward child sup-
port for children from previous relationships. When her children were
out of school during the summer, Anita quit her job, since child care
costs would be more than what she would be able to bring home from
a job.

Anita, like many other women, seemed baffled by the require-
ments of the welfare system. They believed that by working, they were
“playing by the rules.” Yet, their ability to get any support seemed to
go away once they were employed. Anita, at the end of the interview,
told us emphatically that she “wanted to talk about FIA” (the Family
Independence Agency, the name of Michigan’s welfare system at that
time). She believed that as soon as recipients started working, benefits
were immediately cut. She said, “They cut the food stamps, they cut the
money off cause you’re making money, and then they’ll cut the food
stamps when you might just be making enough to pay your bills. And
you just have a little bit over, but you have, like, three kids, and these
three kids, they got to eat! And it’s like, well this bill is not getting paid
this month because I have to have food!” Anita thought that the welfare
agency should at least provide food stamp benefits to children, if not to
working adults.

Like most other states, Michigan allowed welfare recipients to work
and retain some TANF benefits. Each month the state permitted recipi-
ents to keep the first $200 of earnings plus 20 percent of the remaining
earnings before reducing the TANF grant dollar for dollar. However,
compared to the policies of other states, Michigan’s earned income
disregard policy was not especially generous, and a working recipient
would be ineligible for welfare unless she worked part time or full time
at a very low wage. For example, a single mother with two children
who worked 35 hours a week at a job paying $6 an hour would lose eli-
gibility for cash assistance. In contrast, in 24 other states, such a single
mother would still qualify for TANF. However, the federal Food Stamp
Program is designed to assist low-income working families, regardless
of whether or not they receive TANF support. Benefits are provided via
a debit card and can be used to purchase food. Eligibility is based on
earnings, the number of people who share meals together, and an asset
test. A single mother in Michigan with three children should be eligible
for at least some food stamp benefits until she makes a little more than
$9.30 an hour and works full time.
However, many of our respondents may not have been aware of the rules that allowed them to combine work with benefit receipt. At the third WES survey wave in 1999 we asked respondents a series of questions to determine how much they knew about various welfare regulations, post–welfare reform. Women were asked if they thought that once a recipient got a job, TANF benefits would be ended (the correct answer is no) and the same question about food stamps (again, the correct answer is no). Just under two-fifths (38 percent) of our survey respondents in 1999 believed that women who got a job while on welfare would lose their benefits, and a smaller proportion, 26 percent, thought that food stamp benefits would be ended upon getting a job. Thus, significant segments of the women in our study did not know the welfare rules and may not have sought out benefits for which they may have been eligible.

A smaller number of women in the qualitative portion of the study not only could not think of where they might go for help (or what kind of assistance they might want), they also could not articulate a clear plan for the future. None of these women earned particularly high wages, between $7 and $8 an hour, and all of them expressed a strong dislike for their current jobs. Yet they uniformly seemed at a loss to think about how they might change their current situations. A couple talked vaguely about moving out of the state, noting that Michigan’s economy had never completely recovered from the loss of auto manufacturing jobs. Others, such as Sally, a cashier at a large discount retailer, would not consider moving until their children finished school. Until then, she said she didn’t have a clue as to what she wanted for her future.

What, then, can policy do to assist women, like many in our study, who want to return to school but do not know how while their children are still at home? What changes could be made in the public assistance system to help lower-income working families, such as those headed by Anita, the fast-food employee, to supplement their wages and to clear up potential misconceptions around eligibility? What role is there for policy to work with women like Sally who are mired in a lower-paying job but see no alternative? Finally, are there ways to encourage more family-friendly practices in lower-wage workplaces or to enact policies that could help all workers better manage their family lives? In the final chapter, I consider these questions.
Notes

1. The remaining two respondents, both of whom were self-employed, had great difficulty answering this question and did not provide an assessment of their overall advancement.

2. As Table 6.1 shows, 2.1 percent ($n = 8$) of those reporting that they had completed high school or a GED in 1997 subsequently reported that they participated in GED or high school completion activities. This could be due to errors in recall, overreporting of educational attainment at the first interview wave, data entry error, or a combination of these factors.

3. Similar to the rest of the WES sample, in 1997 about 40 percent of the respondents in the qualitative study met the diagnostic screening criteria for any of the following mental health disorders: major depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, or social phobia. Over the course of the entire study, 68.4 percent of the sample and 65.6 percent of the qualitative respondents had at least one mental health disorder one or more times.

4. These figures were computed using the “Marriage Calculator” available from the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. We assume that the woman has no assets, no vehicle, receives no child support, and has been on TANF for at least six months. The calculator is available at: http://marriagecalculator.acf.hhs.gov/marriage/calculator.php (accessed April 2008).