Spring 4-2014


Cynthia Tobar
CUNY Bronx Community College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/bx_pubs

Part of the Community-Based Research Commons, Education Policy Commons, Oral History Commons, Public History Commons, Social Policy Commons, Social Welfare Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


This Book Chapter or Section is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx Community College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Documenting the Untold Stories of Feminist Activists at Welfare Rights Initiative: A Digital Oral History Archive Project

Cynthia Tobar

People had internalized all the bad things they hear about women on welfare, and so they started to realize that these problems that seemed so deeply and uniquely personal were actually not; there were bigger issues at play. And their harsh life experience gave them expertise that was missing in the decision-making that frames those policies. So that's a real transformation to take that leap, that shift in how you see yourself and how you see the world, from believing that you're the reason for the world's problems, you're the reason for poverty, and to instead realizing you've got some experience and expertise, in fact, that needs to be shared. And that if people understood how incredibly committed you are to getting off welfare, how you want nothing more than to be self-sufficient or self-sustaining for your family. And if they knew about the obstacles that you were encountering each day, exactly the nature of those obstacles, maybe some of those obstacles could be removed.

— Melinda Lackey, Co-founder, WRI, January 2012 (Tobar, 2012a)

Introduction

As an archivist/activist, I wish to incorporate multiple voices, reach diverse audiences, and encourage popular participation in presenting and preserving the history of the Welfare Rights Initiative (WRI), a grassroots student activist and community leadership training organization located at Hunter College. I wish to examine, via oral history interviews, social movement activity at the level of a grassroots organization as embodied by WRI, which was developed to aid student welfare recipients to become agents of social change and actively involve them with policymaking. I believe this social justice organization exemplifies not only grassroots organizing efforts in New York City, but also the history of working-class feminist activism in the United States.

The digital oral history archive of WRI is targeted at researchers, students, activists, and historians as a tool to enhance research and teaching in social protest movements and feminist activism. Consequently, this project seeks to fill in gaps in the research on this topic and capture the experiences of how the founders and participants of this largely woman-led organization came together to implement social change.

This archive documents WRI's progression from a student- and faculty-led grassroots movement to its present incarnation as a student advocacy organization. WRI seeks to serve under-served
populations citywide, primarily women and girls, via its outreach programs that are designed to encourage those who are economically disadvantaged to study and obtain higher education and/or job training. This oral history project will give a platform to those who generally have little voice in the public debate on welfare reform: former and/or current welfare recipients—WRI’s founders and membership base. It will provide students and scholars of social movements a positive working example of how women from various backgrounds can band together and enact social change.

**Background: Welfare Rights Movement**

*When you have a reality, when you see the impact of policy right before you, and you see not only the impact of policy, but how women are penalized for the fact that they're—for example, couple years back I had a student, and when she came in she was explaining that, “Well, I wanna be in school. But my benefits were cut because I'm in school. And now I don't even have enough to feed my kid. So I'm trying to get food to feed my kid.” [...] So here we are in a situation where here she was as a mom trying to get an education. They cut her food stamps because she's trying to get an education. So she's not able to give her kid what she was able to before. Another branch of that same larger agency then comes in and say, “You're not being a good mother because you're not feeding your child properly. So we have to come in and see if you're fit enough to keep that child.” Well, that doesn't make sense. So did you realize, policy maker, that this was going to be the outcome of what you were designing?*  
—Dillonna Lewis, Co-Executive Director, WRI, August 2011 (Tobar, 2011a)

Scholars such as Guida West (Rutgers), Mimi Abramovitz (Hunter School of Social Work), and Premilla Nadasen (Queens College) have examined the role of gender bias in the establishment of social policy governing the eligibility for welfare benefits and the distribution of provisions between men and women. Many advocate for the involvement of welfare recipients in social policy to address the institutional resources that need to be in place in order to insure recipients of economic mobility once they are off welfare. These scholars have produced a rich body of work that makes the case for understanding and correcting a train of exclusions, prejudices, and hierarchies that adversely affect women in the social welfare system.

Almost from the start of the welfare rights movement, scholars have noted that differences among women, especially differences of race, class, and sexuality, frequently led to ruptures within grassroots
activist groups. Guida West’s pioneering account, *The National Welfare Rights Organization: The Social Protest of Poor Women*, chronicles the rise and fall of the National Welfare Rights Organization, or NWRO. West's account, which was culled from her time as an active member of NWRO, illustrates the discrepancy between its formal principles and organizational structure (with membership and leadership theoretically confined to the welfare poor), and the daily reality of decision-making by primarily white, male, middle-class organizers. The insights gained through West's own experience with the movement are evident again in her discussion of the difficulties in forming coalitions across class lines.

Mimi Abramovitz’s *Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States* examines the long-standing relationship between welfare and gender inequality. She asserts that sexism, patriarchy, and the gender division of labor and social reproduction have shaped the welfare state, and that traditional studies of social welfare that considered only class struggles and economic production failed to regard these essential issues. Further, she examines welfare policies from the three main theoretical perspectives—liberal, social citizenship, and Marxist—and offers four feminist critiques to these traditional views (Abramovitz, 1996, p. 93).

The dominant narrative of the women’s movement, which was composed almost entirely of white women, burst onto the scene in the late '60s. For a variety of reasons, black women (and other women of color) came late to organized feminism, not forming their own groups until the '70s. Black women who had been active participants in the previous decades' civil rights movement were subjected to ferocious demands that they step back into "traditional" gender roles. Most women of color remained hostile to feminism. Premilla Nadasen (2005), however, challenges this assumption in *Welfare Warriors: The*...

---

1 Second wave feminist scholarship has suggested that conflicts over race, class, and sexuality were often irreconcilable, leading to many separate identity-based women’s groups. Alice Echols shows how radical feminists in the post-1960s era placed consciousness-raising, such as critiquing beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures, above building organizing protests for social change (Echols, 1989).

2 See: Evans, 2008, and Rosen, 2000. Both Evans and Rosen also attribute outside forces, such as the rise of the religious right and the conservative movement, to the downswing in feminist organizing from the early 1980s.
Welfare Rights Movement in the United States, stating that the welfare rights movement of the ’60s and ’70s articulated a new black feminism:

The welfare rights movement has to be viewed as an integral part of the black freedom movement […] It did not emerge simply as a frustrated response to the loss of direction by black activists and a desire to focus more attention on economic issues […] Although support from middle-class activists […] aided tremendously in the formation of the national movement, the impetus for organizing came from the women themselves and was rooted in their experiences. (p. 233)

Mobilizing CUNY Students for Welfare Rights

When I was on public assistance they were like, “What do you want to do?” I said, “Well, I’m going to go back to school.” And they looked at me and they were like, “Oh, okay, so you’re going to go get a two-year degree.” I’m like, “No, I’m going to get a four-year degree.” And they said, “You can’t get a four-year degree on public assistance.” “Can’t? Why not?” You know, what is that about? And, I started to read. And, like, I’m entitled to go to school, and I’m going to go to school, and I’m not going to go to a two-year school, I’m going to go to a four-year school. And, I think at that time—yeah, I did, I had my associate’s degree already from New York Technical College, and I was going to go to a four-year school now. So they were like, “Well, no, you can go and be a home health aid, or you can go and get a clerical position. These are the things that you can do.” And they had a list of positions that I could have, like, kind of on a sheet. And they’re like, “Okay,” I’m like, “Well, this isn’t going to work.”

—Vanessa Lyles, WRI Alumni, September 2011 (Tobar, 2011b)

Previous welfare regulations made it relatively easy for recipients to go to college. But in 1995, New York City instituted the Work Experience Program (WEP), which required welfare recipients to perform unpaid labor for the city. WEP was created in tandem with the 1996 federal welfare reform legislation turning welfare funds and jurisdiction primarily over to individual states.\(^3\) Hundreds of thousands of people were removed from the welfare rolls with no guarantee of employment training or education. At CUNY, enrollment of welfare recipients fell from 28,000 to 10,000 (Golden, 1999) as students dropped out to fulfill their workfare obligations. WRI aims to help students on public assistance

---

\(^3\) By the ’90s, centrist social policy took hold with the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOR). President Clinton signed it into law in 1996, making good on his 1992 campaign promise to “end welfare as we know it.” The PRWOR’s aim was to discourage illegitimacy and teen pregnancy by denying benefits to mothers with additional children while on welfare and mandating work requirements within two years of receiving benefits to promote individual responsibility.
throughout the CUNY system remain in college despite time-consuming, dead-end workfare requirements as well as other roadblocks the system puts in their way (Weikart, 2005).

“These students were targeted as the most able-bodied population that if put into a workfare program might give the workfare program good numbers and have it look successful,” according to Melinda Lackey, founding director of WRI. In exchange for giving up their studies, these students were being offered workfare positions, which at the time consisted of working for the parks department or the sanitation department. Supposedly this was training for work in the real world, but most often people were given menial tasks such as cleaning bathrooms or subway platforms. For these former college students, this type of “work” experience was not going to propel them out of poverty.

A year later, in 1997, the Economic Justice Project (EJP) was formed. Through a collaboration with CUNY Law School, the EJP paired second-year CUNY law students with students from across CUNY who were fighting to keep their public assistance benefits and stay in school. In 2000, a coalition that included WRI and EJP was able to get New York State to pass the Work-Study and Internship Law, which allows work-study and internship hours to count toward a college student’s public assistance work requirement and prohibits welfare officials from unreasonably interfering with the student’s ability to attend classes.

WRI has evolved over the years, from its beginnings as an awareness-building course to an overall community leadership program. Dillonna Lewis, Co-Executive Director of WRI, has witnessed much of this change, saying:

I think in the early years of WRI, it was about training students to be more involved. Not so much that students started off being involved. With the students it was a first time experience. One of the things that I realized is that when someone comes to you, before you say, ‘Here is the ticket, get on that bus and go to Albany and advocate for your rights,’ you have to make sure that students feel confident and prepared to self-advocate. If someone can’t feed their kids, and I don’t feel empowered, they won’t feel eager to jump on a bus to Albany […] I always tell students, 'We don't give you strength. You don't come to WRI and we give you voice. You always had a voice,
but it’s just that now you can see different ways to make your voice more effective.’ (Tobar, 2011a)

**Community-Based Archiving**

*I think that everybody has to be in this for the long haul. I think everybody has to know that if we’re ever going to treat people who are living below the poverty line, near the poverty line, just above the poverty line—the poverty line being a ridiculous number anyway—that it is a long, long haul and that we have to use every method we have, whether it be writing, speaking, organizing, whatever, and know that it will take us and the people after us, the people after us, the people before us to do it.*

—Ruth Sidel, Faculty advisory committee, WRI, February 2012 (Tobar, 2012b)

This notion of community-based archiving describes the methodology behind archival practice that directly involves the communities being documented in organizing their records for community intent. In an effort to give a “voice to the voiceless,” there are various tactics an archivist can employ to include materials in their collections that would document the history of traditionally underrepresented people or organizations.

Archivists such as Randall Jimerson (2009) suggest four approaches that I believe directly correlate to community-based archiving: 1) reconsider the principal of provenance in light of unequal power relationships; 2) “seek opportunities to preserve records of those often overlooked by their collecting strategies and recognize the broader concept of provenance for an entire community”; 3) consider going beyond our “custodial role to fill in the gaps, to ensure that documentation is created where it is missing”; and 4) recognize the value of “oral transmission” by both recognizing the “primacy of oral tradition in some cultures,” and seeking to add to the completeness of the archival record by proactively creating oral histories (Theimer, 2010). The first two points concentrate on the challenges surrounding provenance of selected items for a collection, which addresses concerns about how we as archivists determine historical accuracy. The last two points refer to the importance of looking outside traditional archival practice and recognizing the value of emotional accuracy provided from unwritten accounts of the past.

In the context of community-based archiving and its demand that we all acknowledge the reality of growing disparities in the historical record and their social consequences, an inability to access scholarship is a symptom of a much larger issue. Thankfully, a growing number of activists, archivists,
and scholars in many fields are waking up to the problem of open access to scholarship and are looking for ways to solve it. For some—as is illustrated by WRI—the limit to access is recognized as a troubling component within a larger network of socio-economic factors that include the inequities and systematic impoverishment of the public education system and the “disruption” of higher education.

We have unprecedented need for this type of scholarship to be widely and freely available. As an open access activist, I felt that providing a Web-based portal for WRI’s story was a key element in addressing this problem, and this principle provided the foundational basis for this project.

Some organizations, such as Groundswell—an active network that consists of 16 oral historians, community organizers, and cultural workers—were formed out of a desire to tackle the unique challenges that activists/archivists face as they work to “[preserve] oral histories for future generations of movement leaders,” while also emphasizing the need to “[respect] community control and ownership” of these histories. For Sarah Loose, one of Groundswell’s founders, the distinction for this type of activist oral history lies in its use towards facilitating movement building:

> What distinguishes “activist oral history” from most oral history work is its explicit aim of social transformation and its direct connection to or active, intentional use by social movement actors to further their organizing efforts and campaigns. Many oral history projects and archives contain or collect interviews that relate to controversial social issues and explore the dynamics of social movements. But unless and until these interviews are mobilized by and for the protagonists of social movements, they are unlikely to directly lead to social change in a meaningful and significant way. (Loose, 2011)

Ultimately, I’m interested in exploring how this form of community-based archiving can move beyond the academic to mobilize for social change and bolster WRI’s movement-building efforts. Community-based archiving, as exemplified by this digital oral history archive, sustains the idea of online communities as a medium for transforming space, playing a vital role in uncovering human networks that have been overlooked in the past. Archives are arsenals of history, of law, and of democratic accountability. They can provide a corrective action in support of justice by documenting under-served
communities. As citizen archivists, we can co-create with those affected communities, ensuring that there is equal representation of the needs, interests, and perspectives of all citizens.

**Digital Framework and Access**

For the digital framework, this project was modeled after a similar documentary project in 2006, undertaken by Tamar Carroll (College of the Holy Cross), that focused on documenting the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW). Taking the form of an electronic resource and providing an in-depth introduction, primary documents, and oral history interviews, Carroll chronicled how working-class women were able to form cross-racial partnerships to work for women's empowerment. The one drawback, however, is that this project is accessible only via the “Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000” database, which is available only to paid subscribers.

There have been other oral history projects that have focused on working-class feminist grassroots organizations and activists, such as the New York City Women Community Activists Oral History Project (located at Smith College), and documentary projects that have aimed at collecting primary source material specific to welfare programs in the United States, such as *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents, 1935-1996* (Nadasen, Mittelstadt, & Chappell, 2009). None, however, has attempted to transform this type of research into a freely accessible, Web-based oral history digital archive.

The WRI Oral History Project consists of audio files of personal narratives as well as transcripts. In July 2011, I requested a brief informational interview with the executive directors, and, initially, this was the way narrators were solicited. Through their help, I was able to reach out to the founders of WRI via email invitations, introducing them to the project’s goals and encouraging them to participate. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive: not one potential narrator turned down a request to be interviewed. I was also invited to join WRI on its annual retreat for students in October 2011, where I was able to reach out to current students and solicit student narrators for the project. I handled all the interviewing for the project, and, spanning an eight-month period beginning in August 2011, acquired key interviews with WRI’s leadership, founders, and a few student alumni. My hope is that putting WRI alumni’s, students’,
and leaders’ participation in oral histories in an openly accessible online format will encourage the active use of their stories in scholarship, activism, and policymaking. Digital technologies such as social media and Semantic Web markup, which have been incorporated in each individual interview's record in the archive, increase the findability of these interviews with an underrepresented portion of the community and present a more vital role in framing the historical record. One of the advantages of using born-digital oral history interviews in a free, Web-based format is their usability from a remote location. Even casual perusal by an interested Internet user fulfills the purpose of the digital archive: to offer the widest possible access to everyone.

Changes in metadata standards and Semantic Web technologies have an immense impact on resource discovery, increasing access to digital oral histories. In the spirit of new metadata standards that explore distributed, collaborative approaches to "finding stuff," I decided to implement Schema.org. A microdata standard that seeks to work seamlessly among the Google, Yahoo!, and Bing search engines, Schema.org provides a way to include structured data in webpages. Since its introduction in June 2011, the Schema.org vocabulary has grown to cover descriptive terms for content such as movies, music, organizations, locations, and news items. The mission of Schema.org is "to improve the display of search results, making it easier for people to find the right web pages." The initiative has emerged as a focal point for publishers of structured data in webpages, and this standard has been applied to the WRI Oral History Project site.

My goal was to provide cross-referencing and searchability within and across audio interviews so that scholars and researchers could conveniently study them, as well as to analyze whether the user-centric interface can in fact offer the most worthwhile access to this digital collection. Future considerations will involve preservation efforts for these born-digital interviews, as well as to digitally archive the project site. Currently, I am also exploring options such as using the Internet Archive’s Archive-It service, which allows subscribers to archive website content that is then hosted and stored by the Internet Archive.
Conclusion

It is essential to capture the first-person memories of grassroots feminist activism, in the case of WRI within CUNY—and in New York City in general—before the women who founded and developed this organization move on. The historical importance of documenting oral history interviews of feminist activist grassroots organizations is difficult to estimate. CUNY has long been influenced by a strong activist spirit, a spirit that is prevalent among its faculty and student body and emblematic of dramatic demographic, social, economic, technological, and political shifts in New York City that have fundamentally altered the nature of both social welfare and workforce development. This sentiment is echoed in CUNY’s libraries and its library faculty, who have become ardent advocates for open access and a quality higher education for all students. This trend is evident in recent Library Association of CUNY conferences, which have focused on “past, present, and future of library activism” (Adams, 2012) as well as exploring how librarians are moving beyond being gatekeepers of knowledge and “becoming engaged in communities’ production of knowledge” (Litwin, 2012).

Many people have strong opinions on the issue of social welfare, either demonstrating their full support of or opposition to welfare programs aimed at reducing poverty, hardship, and inequality. Because of this dichotomy, it is difficult to develop opportunities that promote open dialog between supporters and opponents of welfare reform and its effect on welfare recipients’ access to higher education. My hope is to address this issue by working with other activist organizations, such as Groundswell, as well as forming partnerships with schools beyond Hunter College and CUNY to host programs where the debate about welfare reform is active and contentious. These programs would use the recorded oral history interviews collected by the WRI Oral History Project to explore the themes and history behind the stereotypes of the welfare system in the U.S., as well as their function in regulating the social, political, and economic behavior of welfare recipients. Via this digital oral history, we can create an environment where people with different viewpoints might feel comfortable sharing their opinions about welfare and access to higher
education and thereby want to find solutions. As a result, this project can use oral history and its future public programs to inspire welfare recipients to mobilize and add their collective voices to the debate in social policymaking.

Librarians and archivists aim to share knowledge and help locate and improve the discoverability of archival content. But outside of these traditional roles, we can play new roles in supporting the usability of archival content—such as oral history interviews—as evidence in social research as well as to better inform activism. We can help create new public spaces, both virtual and physical, that ensure that the rights and intentions of creators of community archives are respected, preserving the legacy of social movements for future generations while giving a voice to those who have traditionally been left out of our historical narrative. With these actions, we create a vital and participatory “living archive.”

Documenting this type of activism in the digital realm is essential in order to improve the discoverability of these interviews, as well as to ensure that the legacy of WRI persists through open access. This is what begins dialog, not politics as usual. And this is what’s needed to mobilize community organizations and movements, empowering the community, and helping co-create solutions.

Works Cited


