

# Women at Work

By Julianne Malveaux

What do Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart and Hewlett-Packard's Carly Fiorina have in common? According to *Fortune* magazine, they are among the 50 most powerful women in American business, potent examples of the way the corporate climate has changed in the past two decades. The Oct. 25 issue was the second time that magazine had published such a list. Presumably, before 1998 there were too few women to rank.

I'm tempted to describe these 50 women as icons who have shattered glass ceilings, but the top-ranked woman, Fiorina, says she doesn't believe glass ceilings exist. The *Fortune* list aside, women in corporate leadership are more the exception than the rule. And reality for most women is sharply different for the experiences of those at the very top.

According to a recent study by Catalyst, a New York-based nonprofit that works to advance women in business, women of color face a "concrete ceiling," not a glass one, when they try to move up the corporate ladder, earning as little as 60 percent of what white women earn, even when they are senior managers. Catalyst surveyed 1,700 women of color from 30 leading companies and found that barriers include lack of mentorship, informal networking and high-visibility assignments. "Not only is the 'concrete ceiling' more difficult to penetrate," says Catalyst President Sheila Wellington, "women of color cannot see through it to glimpse the corner office."

To be sure, there are exceptions, like Maxwell House's Ann Fudge, a recent winner of the Sara Lee Frontrunner Award. Most corporate women of color, though, combine lofty aspirations with realism. If white women aren't shattering the glass ceiling in droves, how can they expect to hurdle concrete barriers?

Women at the top generate lots of ink. Their achievements are often used as a "you can make it" reminder to those who see workplace barriers all around them, both at the bottom and the top—from the challenge of juggling work and family life to the struggles for equal pay and a working environment that is free of discrimination. When someone like Fiorina says there is no glass ceiling, it seems that issues of discrimination in the workplace are a thing of the past. But women who are entry-level employees or the middle managers may have very different perspectives as they chart their course to the top. The danger in focusing on women at the top is that it eclipses concern for more typical women, the majority of whom still work in clerical and service jobs. A world away from women who contemplate glass and concrete ceilings, those mired in the "sticky floor" of the workplace often deal with sweatshop conditions, low pay, unpaid overtime and other forms of economic oppression.

Workers who hold low-paying service jobs—and they're mostly women—have hardly benefited from the six-year economic expansion that the Clinton administration proudly touts as one of its major achievements. About half of all women who work full time earn less than \$25,000 a year. Twelve million Americans—including 7 million women—scrape by on the minimum wage. These numbers are particularly revealing because much of the discussion about the economy focuses on low unemployment rates and labor shortages in technology areas. Scant attention has been paid to those at the bottom of the economy. These include women who have been forced off public assistance—who often must take low-wage, part-time jobs—and women who provide our society with essential services, such as home health aides who take care of our sick and elderly, but take home less than \$15,000 a year. When these women head households or have children, their pay sinks below the poverty line.

We've heard lots about "lazy" welfare recipients, but those who earn the minimum wage are working full time and still not making ends meet. Recent research about women and the minimum wage refutes all the stereotypes. Most aren't supplementing their income; instead the minimum-wage is all there is for them. Three-quarters of those who earn the minimum wage are adults—not teens. Nearly half of those in current minimum-wage jobs work full time. Most low-wage women are white, but women of color—who represent 22 percent of the labor force—make up a third of minimum-wage workers. And a third of those who would gain from a minimum-wage increase are parents. Nearly a million single moms alone would benefit from a minimum-wage hike.

The legislation proposed by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) would increase the minimum wage by \$1 over a two-year period, from the current rate of \$5.15 to \$5.65 next year, and then to \$6.15 in 2001. In states with higher minimum wages, and in cities that have passed living wage legislation, workers might not get a raise, but most workers will see their raises jump, in some cases out of poverty.

In Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and West Virginia, more than one in five women would get a raise if Congress passed a minimum-wage increase. According to the Economic Policy Institute and the Institute for Women's Policy Research, two Washington think tanks, more than half a million women in Texas and California and more than 300,000 women in Florida, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania, would improve their status.

Opponents of the minimum-wage increase say it would cause layoffs and high unemployment. But unemployment rates are lower than they have been in 30 years. Indeed, the work of the Economic Policy Institute and the Institute for Women's Research shows that employment levels of low-wage workers have increased dramatically, and that an increase in

the minimum wage is not likely to dampen employment prospects. Increasing the minimum wage would spread the effects of economic prosperity around by increasing the incomes of low-income families, especially single moms. It also would remind former welfare recipients that the transition from welfare to work can be rewarding.

**M**ore problems than pay confront working women, both at the top and at the bottom. But large corporations are employing fewer workers, which means that more of us work in temporary and part-time jobs, and at small companies that offer fewer benefits. The *Fortune* 500 job, at the bottom and the top, is seen as the "good job"—the alternative is often to become one of the more than 40 million Americans without health insurance. And while dozens of companies have developed "work-life" initiatives that offer flex-time and allowances for childcare needs, many human resource experts say the effect of these initiatives is weakened by pressing workloads. Similarly, we may be hearing less about complaints of sexual harassment and workplace discrimination not because these things are less likely to happen, but because women are reluctant to bring attention to themselves by complaining.

Economic expansion has generated a 401(k) windfall for workers. But women near the bottom of the economy don't contribute to these pension funds because they can't afford to. Nor do they invest in the stock market. Even when they know savings are important, earning 70 cents for every dollar men earn, they won't start saving until they think they have enough disposable income. Thus the pay gap transforms itself into a gap in retirement income, and older women, with longer life expectan-

cies and smaller pensions, are twice as likely as older men to spend their "golden" years in poverty. The economic status of many working women is jeopardized by their growing debt, and their status is likely to worsen because of proposed new bankruptcy laws that would make it more difficult for those who have credit card debt—usually women—to declare bankruptcy.

Working women face challenges in closing the pay gap. Organizing is the good news—women benefit when they're union members, earning as much as 30 percent more than nonunionized women who do the same work. The AFL-CIO women's division reflects expanded possibilities for the support of working women, and is a reminder of the benefits of tackling workplace issues collectively. In Los Angeles, for example, the Service Employees International Union gained the right, in February, to organize county home care workers who earned the state minimum wage of \$5.75 before unionization. Buoyed by that victory, organized labor has targeted the nursing home industry in other states, where some of the nation's lowest-paid workers are employed.

While women at the top remind us how far we have come, women at the bottom remind us of how much work there is to do. As long as the women who take care of our children and our elders, who serve our food and clean our clothing are paid less than a living wage, the struggle for gender equality continues. The challenge is to maintain an urgency in this struggle, even as an expanding economy and crumbling barriers treats us to the success stories of women like Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart and Carly Fiorino. ■

Julianne Malveaux is a Washington-based syndicated columnist.



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# Bad to Worse

## Welfare reform and feminist backlash

By Mimi Abramovitz

**W**elfare is disappearing. By March 1999, the national caseload had plummeted by almost 50 percent from its peak—with more stunning declines in many individual states. In three, the welfare rolls fell by more than 80 percent. In seven others, the decline was more than 60 percent. Only one state—tiny Rhode Island—showed a decline of less than 20 percent.

The shrunken rolls have elicited cheers of success from nearly every politician, policy-maker and presidential candidate. If reduction was the main goal of welfare reform, then reformers can rightfully claim victory. But if welfare reform set out to improve lives of the women and children who utilize it, something has gone dangerously awry. Few observers have noticed—or seem to care—that welfare reform undercuts the ability of all women to secure jobs with decent pay, reproductive freedom, caretaking supports and protection from domestic violence. Indeed, the effort to “reform” welfare comes as part of the wider backlash against the gains made by the women’s movement and the capacity of women to make their own choices about work and family life.

Since its enactment of part of the 1935 Social Security Act, the welfare program has come under periodic attack—largely because it serves women viewed as having departed from prescribed wife and mother roles and therefore “undeserving” of aid. Like now, earlier assaults forced women off welfare by declaring them unmotivated to work, stigmatizing single motherhood and tying assistance to moralistic behavioral standards. Then as now, the racial stereotypes of women of color as matriarchal and promiscuous lurked just below the surface and could not be missed.

The current drive to “reform” welfare began with the 1988 Family Support Act (FSA), which converted Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) from a program that allowed single mothers to stay home with their children into a mandatory work program. By 1992, playing to a decade of economic insecurity among middle-class Americans, politicians found that they could win votes by bashing government programs and the poor. Bill Clinton

rode this “economic panic” into office by promising to “end welfare as we know it.”

In 1994, the Republican Contract with America tried to end welfare altogether by converting it from a federal entitlement program into a state-administered block grant called Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). This historic shift gave the states more power to shape welfare. At the same time, it weakened the entire welfare state by eliminating critical federal supports. Unlike entitlements, Congress can cap the funds of block grants and subject them to annual budget negotiations. With this, the nation’s leaders effectively ended the federal government’s 60-year commitment—however begrudging and meager—to protect the downtrodden.

**Can’t make ends meet.** The main target of welfare reform was women’s work behavior. By placing a five-year lifetime limit on welfare eligibility (22 states have even shorter limits), the 1996 welfare law transformed AFDC into a temporary and transitional work program. The law upped the number of hours that women on welfare must work, penalized states with too few recipients in work programs, forced those lacking jobs to work off their benefits in menial public and private sector jobs, and otherwise stiffened welfare’s already tough work rules. In turn, local welfare departments cut benefits or closed cases for the slightest infraction of the many new rules, such as missing an appointment with a job counselor.

Many women forced off welfare found work—as they always do when a strong economy creates enough jobs. Even so, large numbers of former recipients now report that they cannot make ends meet. Low wages, part-time work, costly childcare, transportation and work expenses have left many women worse off than when they received welfare. In South Carolina, for example, a study by the National Council of State Legislatures found that 50 percent of the women kicked off welfare fell behind in rent or utility payments compared to 39 percent while on welfare. Fourteen percent said they could not afford medical care now, versus 3 percent before. In state after state—having also lost Food