

# WOMEN AND POVERTY

## Building a Stronger Social Safety Net and Addressing Women's Poverty in America



### OUR MISSION

ENSURING THE ECONOMIC  
AND PERSONAL SECURITY OF  
WOMEN AND GIRLS.

### OUR VISION

LEGAL MOMENTUM ENVISIONS  
A SOCIETY IN WHICH ALL  
WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE  
ECONOMICALLY SECURE,  
EMPOWERED TO MAKE  
THEIR OWN CHOICES, AND  
CAN LIVE AND WORK FREE OF  
DISCRIMINATION AND  
VIOLENCE.

### THE REALITY

The poverty rate for adult women has been substantially higher than for adult men in every year since official poverty measurement began. The federal "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families" program (TANF) is the principal safety net for poor families, and 90% of its adult benefit recipients are women. But the program is inadequate, flawed, and fails to offer recipients either a true safety net or a real path out of poverty and into the workforce.

### OUR COMMITMENT

Legal Momentum, the Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund, has long focused on eliminating discrimination, occupational segregation, lack of child care and other factors that force many women to rely on welfare benefits. We work on laws and policies that enable women and girls to access jobs with living wages and benefits, and ensure that women's opportunities to succeed in the workplace are not compromised as a result of gender (discrimination, harassment, violence, pregnancy, or child care responsibilities). However, we also recognize that a fair social safety net system is essential to ensuring that women and children, who make up the vast majority of the nation's poor, are able to survive in turbulent economic times.

### OUR STRATEGY

Legal Momentum combines public policy advocacy, education, and precedent-setting litigation to expand and enforce the law. We educate policymakers, advocates, attorneys, judges, and others to ensure laws and policies are implemented broadly, fairly, and effectively. Feedback from these stakeholders and those working "on the ground" helps us identify policies and laws that fall short for women and informs our development of new policies and laws to ensure women's economic and personal security.

### OUR PROGRAMS

In the current economic crisis, more and more families are turning to TANF and encountering the program's fundamental flaws: barriers that prevent eligible families from accessing benefits, sub-poverty benefit levels that ensure continued hardship, and work rules that stop parents from participating in education and training programs that offer a permanent escape from welfare and poverty. Legal Momentum works to develop new laws and policy solutions that address these issues, alleviate women and children's poverty, and increase women's access to living wage employment.

## OUR IMPACT

Throughout its history, Legal Momentum has litigated major safety net cases in the U.S. Supreme Court, the federal Courts of Appeals, and state supreme courts. We have brought cases to assure that women participating in welfare-to-work programs are protected against sexual harassment, and to assure that federally-funded job training opportunities are available to mothers as well as fathers. Our groundbreaking reports have influenced policymakers and generated media attention.<sup>1</sup> In the last year alone, we have:

- Issued several widely-acclaimed reports addressing topics such as: the dramatic drop in the numbers of families receiving benefits despite the increase in need; opportunities to improve the safety net for women and children provided by upcoming legislation; and the material hardship faced by poor women and children perpetuated by inadequate benefit levels
- Sparked a national dialogue surrounding women's poverty and safety net issues, and began building a national coalition to create real policy reform. In just one year, Legal Momentum's EndPovertyNow coalition has grown to include 700 non-profit organizations, policymakers, researchers, and individuals.
- Collaborated with national, state-based, and local organizations to organize panels, workshops, and other public education forums to educate policymakers and raise awareness of women's poverty, and the reforms needed to address our nation's fraying social safety net.

## OUR FUTURE

Right now, our nation has a unique opportunity to address the flaws in our safety net system. Congress must act in the near future to extend or reauthorize the Temporary Aid for Needy Families program (TANF), which expires in February 2012 on the heels of an economic downturn that is driving more and more families to turn to public safety-net programs for assistance. Our current objectives are to: (a) move the "political needle," increasing the American commitment to a safety net for women and families; (b) improve rights, fairness, and access under the TANF program; and (c) increase and enhance meaningful TANF support for women transitioning to employment and self-sufficiency. We will:

- Lead and collaborate with partners to bring a strong voice for women into the national debate on TANF.
- Engage and inform groups and individuals about TANF reform, and build a constituency supporting an adequate safety net for poor women and families that
  - removes barriers that prevent eligible families from accessing benefits
  - raises benefits to an adequate level
  - ensures women can access the child care they need to meet work requirements, and requires states to follow the federal law that bars sanctioning women unable to secure child care
  - enables women to access job training and educational programs leading to living wage employment
- Publish and disseminate influential policy reports on flaws in the safety net for women and children
- Educate local, state, and federal agencies to reduce barriers to access and improve program benefits and job training opportunities.
- Provide technical assistance to attorneys in states without a strong poverty law bar to enhance access to benefits and ensure that laws and policies are fairly and legally implemented.
- Investigate opportunities to bring a lawsuit with national significance to advance advocacy objectives, expand rights, or draw attention to the current system's failures and inequities.

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<sup>1</sup> These reports, available at [www.legalmomentum.org/our-work/women-and-poverty/tanf-resources.html](http://www.legalmomentum.org/our-work/women-and-poverty/tanf-resources.html), include *The Bitter Fruit Of Welfare Reform: A Sharp Drop In The Percentage Of Eligible Women And Children Receiving Welfare, Meager And Diminishing Welfare Benefits Perpetuate Widespread Material Hardship for Poor Women and Children*, and *Battered by the Storm: How the Safety Net Is Failing Americans and How to Fix It*, the latter co-authored by the Institute for Policy Studies, the Center for Community Change, and Jobs with Justice.

