

Kūlia i ka nu'u: Native Hawaiian Single Mothers Striving for Excellence Under the Guise of Welfare Reform

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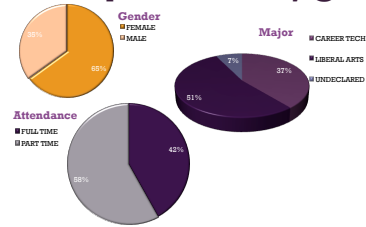
Single-mother students on welfare are a small, unique demographic in institutions of higher education. My preliminary research shows that, more often than not, social service caseworkers use discretion to impede, rather than support, single-mother students in pursuit of higher education—especially in the post Welfare Reform Act era. In recent years, a plethora of scholarly literature has been conducted on the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 [1, 2, 4] that highlights Temporary Aid for Needy Families' (TANF) disallowance for welfare-to-work plans to incorporate higher education [3]. However, much of this work has focused on the mainland, thus creating a dearth of literature on Hawai'i's adjustment to welfare reform policies. My project fills this gap by asking how TANF guidelines are being implemented in Hawai'i, specifically on the island of Maui. In my Interdisciplinary Studies Field Major (ISF) thesis, I combine my own research with previous data in order to conduct a qualitative study of the academic trajectory of single mother students on welfare pursuing higher education on Maui. My research question is: how are single-mothers supported or discouraged throughout their experiences as students and welfare recipients? By critically assessing the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 as the legal framing of the contemporary “welfare to workfare” [4] ideology, I investigate how implementations of this statutory law create bureaucratic controlling processes and moralist state gatekeepers. This project ethnographically illustrates (1) the historic defederalization of the welfare system, (2) the feminization of poverty, and (3) the ethos of discretionary practices from a postcolonial perspective.

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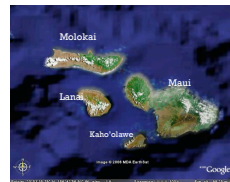


* Makeup of Student Body @ Maui College



**Why did you choose to attend college?*

"Looking at my life I realized I had nothing so I looked at my choices and looked at my paychecks and I took the initiative to go to school. I did not want to be like every other woman on this island...another single mom on welfare with no future."



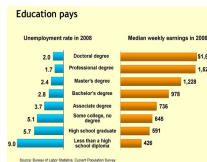
MAUI : a unique research site

Maui County consists of 4 islands in total: Maui, Molokai, Lanai, and Kaho'olawe. University of Hawai'i, Maui College has education centers throughout the island: Molokai and Lanai have small on site education centers and the island of Maui has the main campus in Kahului as well as centers in Lahaina, Kihei, and Hana.

* The Benefits of Pursuing Higher Education

- Improved Self Esteem/Self Worth
- Positive Influence on Children
- Community Building

"Before University I was a woman with three children that needed my ex-husband for everything. Now, I can support myself and my children, and I am proud of that."



"You go through the bad to get to the good...Now I am an educated woman and my whole life has been changed"

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References

- [1] Chappell, Marisa. 2010. *The war on welfare: family, poverty, and politics in modern America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- [2] Hays, Sharon. 2003. *Flat broke with children: women in the age of welfare reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- [4] Wacquant, Loïc J. D. 2009. *Punishing the poor: the neoliberal government of social insecurity*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press.