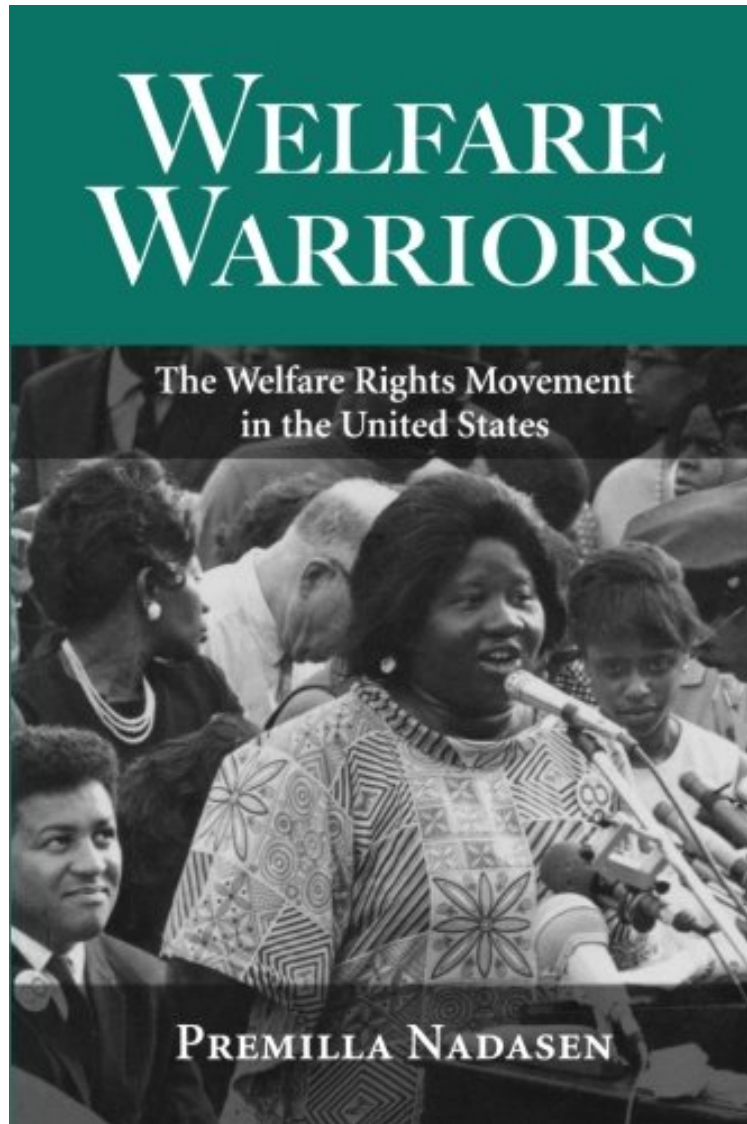


# Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States

*Premilla Nadasen*

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**Premilla Nadasen : Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Awesome!By ashleeThis text awesomely articulates the perspective

of the women involved in the welfare rights movement- particularly the women of color who were involved; who's stories are often times left out of the larger conversations of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Rights Movement, and the Welfare Rights Movement. 7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Grassroots feminism at it's most personal

By Robin Orlovski

These low-income single mothers might not have all considered themselves 'feminist' as the term was used in the 1970's, but their community organizing for basic rights during that era gave significant weight to the oft-mentioned movement credo the 'personal is political'. Although society supposedly values mothers who want to take care of their children, the race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status of these women intersected in politically disempowering ways. Organizing wasn't an 'extra' for these women; it was their means of survival in a cruel system which wasn't necessarily prepared for them. When welfare was initially set up in the 1930's, racial segregation kept the welfare rolls white. Politicians and taxpayers had an unspoken agreement that welfare was being set up so white women without their husbands could still be a full-time stay at home mother in the prescribed notions of the day. Integration of government programs in the 1960's subsequently transformed the recipients into the 'undeserving poor' who WERE supposed to be outside of the home and working despite having young children. Suddenly government officials began referencing the 'welfare queen' in both allusions and direct references to black women, even if a majority of the welfare recipients remained white. The emergent new right quickly learned that the mere specter of black women reproducing frightened enough voters to swing elections. Welfare influenced elections and public policies through a subtly constructed 'law and order' appeal where direct appeals to segregation were failing. Voters were convinced 'they' were getting rich off of having babies. Thus as the government's own minimum cost of living dramatically rose during the 1970's, the actual purchasing power of the monthly payments further decreased to absurdly unworkable levels. Welfare rights organizers such as Johnnie Tilmon pointed out the impossibility of any human attempting to live on those amounts of money, never mind 'comfortably'. They also emphasized that women on welfare were consequently subjected to purchasing the most run down materials and the most spoiled foods in their communities with the money which they did receive. Hardly living large off of the system, such conditions fueled their organizing anger. The welfare rights movement also protested punitive raids on recipient homes. Attempting to see if a man was illegally staying in the home, these raids removed autonomy from the recipients. People on welfare were not considered adults, but alternately children and social menaces. Nadasen includes some information on 'ending welfare as we know it' in 1996. However, the bulk of her book is a case study of the 1970's welfare rights movement as a political force for and by poor women. Against less than ideal circumstances and token support from other feminists/women activists, how did these women accomplish what they did when they did? What did their idea of a 'just world' look like? This multi-dimensional book also examines the bureaucratic contradictions of the National Welfare Rights Organization. NWRO was a national organization which was supposed to help these women help themselves and each other, but it was run by white middle-class men. Although the men professed to be empathetic to the cause, the women recognized a contradiction. As a consequence of their own organizing, the women came to see themselves as empowered---but from a different construct of "liberation" than one being used by White and/or middle-class groups. For women on welfare, having the right to stay at home and take care of their children was no less disempowering a choice than other women choosing to work outside the home--again because the individual was making a choice over the direction of her own life. This book is essential for women's studies scholars. It is also a good purchase for social science professionals, particularly social workers.

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""Nadasen has written the definitive history of the welfare rights movement that, for a brief moment, turned welfare into a program that helped rather than punished poor women. Carefully researched and fully documented, *Welfare Warriors* reveals the largely untold story of how poor and working class women came together to fight for a decent life. By exploring the working class black feminism that emerged, Nadasen's account also broadens and deepens our understanding of feminism." --Mimi Abramovitz, Professor of Social Policy at Hunter School of Social Work and the City University of New York Graduate Center and author of *Regulating the Lives of Women and Under Attack and Fight*

"Armed with their own brand of feminism in the 1960s and 70s, Premilla Nadasen's *Welfare Warriors* fought militantly and relentlessly against racism, sexism and dehumanizing poverty. They fought their battles in the halls of Congress, the streets of urban communities, and inside the progressive movement itself. Even when they were not victorious, these black women activists were never victims, but rather powerful, complex and committed agents for change. This compelling and compassionate study, meticulously researched and passionately argued, is a must-read for anyone interested in social change politics, feminism or the black freedom movement." --Barbara Ransby, Professor of African American Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago and author of *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*.

About the Author Premilla Nadasen is Associate Professor of History at Queens College, CUNY. She received her PhD from Columbia University.