

The Honorable Lynn C. Woolsey
U.S. Representative of California (1993–2013)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Welfare Mother in Congress

Representative Woolsey describes talking openly to her colleagues about her experiences as a single mother on welfare.

Interview recorded March 7, 2016

But my staff, after I got elected, my staff would say, “Well, well, you can’t go down there and talk about being a welfare mother because that’s all you’re going to be known for.” And my answer was, “If I don’t do it, who will?” I mean, come on! You’ve got, you’ve got to show by example. You can’t just, you know, talk about things. And it turned out that that wasn’t all I was known for, and I would stand on the floor, and I could—and I remember this, and it was, I was part of the welfare reform, well, I was one of the co-chairs of the welfare reform committee in the House, when I was a junior, about that, now that I think, it was the fourth year I was in Congress. And I would stand on the floor and be talking about my experiences, and the place would be, you could hear a pin drop. And I heard somebody say to somebody else, “Yeah, but she’s different.” And I said, “The picture of a welfare mom, the average welfare mom is Caucasian, has two kids”—I had three—“and they’re on welfare, and they’ve been abandoned by the father, and they are on the system about four, five years.” And I, I was three years, I think. And, you know, if when you make people realize that, you know, then they can start maybe paying attention.