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Article

Independence from What? Feminist Responses to 1990s Welfare Reform

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Abstract: The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 treated movement from public assistance into paid employment as evidence of independence. This article examines how three feminist critics challenged that measure. It reads Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon's history of the word "dependency," the Women's Committee of One Hundred's 1995 advertisement against welfare cuts, and Gwendolyn Mink's post-enactment criticism alongside PRWORA and President Bill Clinton's signing statement. The sources appeared at different moments and addressed different audiences. I use welfare justice as a later analytical label for their shared criticism; the authors did not present themselves as a unified school. Across the three sources, leaving aid settled only one part of a mother's economic position. Low wages, child care costs, unpaid caregiving, and reliance on a partner could still limit her choices after benefits ended. Their criticism also brought race and class into a debate that often treated paid work as a universal path to women's independence. They judged independence by the material choices available to a woman, including whether she could work, study, care for children, or leave a dangerous household.

Keywords: welfare reform; feminist politics; dependency; caregiving; PRWORA

1. Introduction

In 1995, the Women's Committee of One Hundred ran an advertisement in the *New York Times* to warn women about proposed welfare cuts. Its headline presented welfare as a source of security for all women [1]. The ad listed familiar events that could suddenly make it hard for a woman to support her children. She might lose a job or health insurance, face divorce, or need to leave a violent relationship. A year later, Congress ended Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and created Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Under the new program, cash aid was subject to time limits and work rules and was no longer guaranteed by federal law [2]. Policy makers increasingly treated a recipient's entry into paid work as evidence of independence.

The debate turned on what happened after a mother left aid. A job brought wages, an employer's hours, and the need to arrange child care. Care at home remained work without a paycheck. Rent, food, health care, and the ability to leave a partner all depended on what money a woman could reach. Following Felicia Kornbluh and Gwendolyn Mink, I use *welfare justice* as a later label for the response found in three contemporary sources [2]. These sources show that some feminist critics, including white feminists, understood welfare reform through

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race and class, since poor women and women of color had long worked for wages without gaining the independence that reformers now promised work would bring.

The three primary sources were written by critics of reform. Mink distinguishes among middle-class feminists, female members of Congress, and the wider women's movement, showing how support and silence took different forms in each group [3]. Fraser and Gordon published their history of the word "dependency" in 1994. The Women's Committee addressed a broad public in 1995 as Congress debated reform. Mink wrote in 1998, after PRWORA took effect. Each text came from a different moment and addressed a different audience. The grouping in this paper is retrospective. The authors themselves were not members of a formal school.

I take them in chronological order so that each text stays close to the circumstances in which it appeared. The order follows the criticism from the language of dependency to women's immediate risks and then to the unequal history of paid work. PRWORA and President Bill Clinton's signing statement provide the official language surrounding their criticism.

2. Welfare Reform and the Politics of Independence

The effort to move recipients into jobs was already well established by 1996. Politicians in both parties had backed stricter work rules, and Clinton supported welfare-to-work programs before becoming president. New Democrats often saw long-term use of aid as a problem employment could remedy [2]. PRWORA gave that position legal force. It ended AFDC and created TANF, placed a five-year lifetime limit on federally funded assistance, and allowed states more discretion in running the program. The law placed work, job preparation, and marriage among the means of reducing needy parents' reliance on government benefits [4]. Listing marriage alongside employment made family support part of the law's answer to dependence.

Clinton likewise put work at the center of his defense. In his signing statement, he described the law as "tough on work" and presented employment as the best route out of poverty. His objections focused on other provisions, especially cuts to food assistance and benefits for immigrants. He discussed child care, health coverage, and wage support mainly as help for the move into a job [5]. He continued to judge the reform mainly by whether recipients found work. The statement said far less about job quality or the forms of dependence that might follow the loss of aid.

Fraser's later history helps explain why the language of independence could serve very different politics. Second-wave feminism had connected economic inequality with cultural status and political voice. By the 1990s, some of its language of autonomy and paid work also suited a politics centered on the market [2, 6]. Kornbluh and Mink locate that shift inside the welfare debate, where motherhood, marriage, race, and personal responsibility shaped the 1996 law [2]. Evans finds the same growing appeal of individual choice and responsibility within feminist politics [7].

Springer criticizes histories that organize feminism into waves centered on white middle-class women, since they can hide the longer course of Black feminism [8]. Her account emphasizes continuities in Black feminist politics and the combined effects of race, class, and gender.

3. Feminist Critiques of Independence

3.1. Dependency and Public Aid

Fraser and Gordon begin with the word itself. Their 1994 essay follows "dependency" through several periods of American history and explains how public assistance acquired its moral weight. By the twentieth century, the word had become closely attached to poor single mothers receiving aid. The welfare mother emerged as the "quintessential welfare dependent," while "independence remains identified with wage labor" [9]. Because wage labor stood for adult independence, the source of a person's income carried a judgment about character. A person paid by an employer appeared to support herself. A poor mother receiving money from the state became suspect.

Race and gender were built into that judgment. A white male wage earner could count as independent even though an employer supplied his income and unpaid work supported his household. A poor mother's connection

to the state was much more visible. Fraser and Gordon's history changes how I read the promise to move her from dependence into work. A benefit records her connection to the government. Her control over daily life may lie with an employer who sets her schedule and pay, a partner who supplies rent money, or a relative who provides child care. She can rely on all three while receiving aid, and she can still rely on them after the aid ends. Welfare policy singled out the tie to government and treated the others as ordinary [9].

3.2. Welfare and Women's Economic Security

The Women's Committee wrote about the same problem through events in women's daily lives. Its ad asked readers to imagine losing a job and health insurance, facing divorce, or needing child care with no relatives close by. Two women appeared by name. Julie Sue Westwood turned to AFDC after a car accident and divorce while she was completing college. The assistance helped her finish her degree. Gloria Wilson had left welfare for a paid job, yet she worried that her children would lose health coverage. The new job left her unsure how she would pay for her children's medical care. The ad's repeated use of "you" placed those crises inside the lives of its readers [1].

Money also shaped a woman's ability to leave a dangerous home. The ad argued that women without cash support could be trapped in violent relationships and left vulnerable in a labor market unfriendly to mothers. A low wage could disappear into rent, medical bills, and child care. When a partner covered those costs, leaving him could mean poverty. Cash assistance offered another, if modest, source of income. The ad closed with its starkest line, "A war against poor women is a war against all women." It asked readers who had never received welfare to see their own lives in the risks it described. Divorce, job loss, and violence could make aid suddenly necessary [1].

3.3. Work, Caregiving, and Citizenship

Mink's 1998 essay looks at feminism's role in the reform debate. Paid employment had helped many white middle-class women earn their own money and reduce a husband's control over household finances. Feminists had fought for access to those jobs. PRWORA used the same language of work and independence to make employment a condition of aid for poor single mothers. Mink argued that welfare should protect the rights that allow women to live independently [3]. Under TANF, a mother could lose needed support for refusing a job. Mink called this being "conscripted into wage work." She noted that single mothers commonly worked for wages and that recipients generally wanted employment. She questioned the use of social policy to compel it [3].

The history of paid work also differed across race and class. Mink writes that for many women of color it had long been "expected," "necessary," and "exploitative" [3]. Employment provided income of one's own, though many of the jobs open to poor women paid little and offered scant security. Springer's criticism of wave histories is useful here [8]. The familiar story of women leaving the home for paid work came largely from white middle-class experience. Women whose labor had always been expected began from another position. PRWORA used one employment test for women with very different histories of work.

Mink also compares the treatment of caregiving in different households. At about the same time that welfare reform required poor single mothers to seek paid work, lawmakers expanded access to Individual Retirement Accounts for homemakers. The IRA change allowed a married homemaker to build retirement savings through the household. A poor single mother doing similar care received no income for it and had to add a job before welfare policy counted her as moving toward self-sufficiency. After she found employment, the hours of care remained and had to be fitted around wage work. Marital status and household income shaped the public value assigned to the same labor [3].

"Private inequalities have public effects," Mink writes. For her, citizenship depended partly on whether a woman could act on her decisions. A woman with no income of her own may stay in a marriage because she cannot afford a place to live. A single mother may want to care for a young child at home and remain poor because that labor brings no wage. These decisions took place inside the household, but money and public policy set their limits. Mink supported policies that would give mothers room to combine employment, education, and care in ways that fit their circumstances. Without enough material security, those choices existed

mostly on paper [3].

4. Conclusions

PRWORA counted movement from assistance into paid employment as movement away from dependence. Yet the end of a benefit could lead to very different lives. One mother might find a steady job with decent pay, health insurance, and hours she could manage. Another might earn low wages, lose medical coverage, and depend more heavily on a partner or relative. A welfare statistic would place both mothers in the same category, even though race and class shaped the work and support available to them. The three sources return to the details hidden by that category, including rent, child care, medical bills, and the money needed to leave a dangerous home. Public assistance sometimes gave a woman room to finish school, care for a child, or move out. A good job could give her room as well.

This matters for the history of feminism in the 1990s. Later accounts often emphasize how the language of autonomy and choice came to fit market-oriented politics. These sources preserve another part of the debate, in which feminist critics followed the effects of work requirements across racial and class differences. They judged independence by what a mother could afford to do after the benefit ended and asked whose experience supplied the model for women's freedom. That part of a mother's life never appeared in the count of welfare cases [1,3,9].

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