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# Doing good motherhood: Creating their own responsible single mother model

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## Introduction

At the turn of the twenty first century, many welfare states – Israel among them – implemented significant reforms pertaining to poor single mothers, abandoning the idea that these mothers should receive compensation for care work for their children in the form of allowances and instead requiring them to take on the additional role of breadwinner (Abramovitz, 2006; Herbst, 2013; Hobson, Lewis, & Siim, 2002; Korteweg, 2003, 2006; Millar, 2005; Pulkingham, Fuller, & Kershaw, 2010). A transition was thus made from mothers entitled to receive assistance from the welfare state as caretakers of children to a group that had to be reintegrated into the job market (Millar, 2005; Millar & Ridge, 2009; Skevik, 2005). Active integration in the job market came to be viewed as welfare; indeed, it was considered the most beneficial and desirable form of assistance from the state (Breitkreuz & Williamson, 2012; Millar, 2005).

Over time, public attitudes toward poor single mothers on welfare were often transformed from pity to blame (Abramovitz, 2006; Herbst, 2013; Millar & Ridge, 2009). This was partly related to a change in the composition of mothers who head single-parent families, from mostly widows to mainly divorced or unmarried women (Abramovitz, 2006). Consequently, poor single mothers face delegitimization, both because they are women without spouses and because they are poor and need allowances. With the exception of countries where their poverty is lower due to a universal family welfare policy (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Norway, France; Letablier & Wall, 2018), single mothers have been stigmatized. Such stigmatization varies, ranging from minor nicknames to blatant labeling (US: Abramovitz, 2006; Bashevkin, 2002; Collins, 2006; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; UK: Dermott & Pomati, 2016; Israel: Herbst, 2013). It is therefore difficult for poor single mothers to prove themselves as "good and moral mothers." As Korteweg (2003) put it, in the US welfare reform of the 1990s, to work was to be moral and to receive allowances was to be immoral. Motherhood and work were thus tied together with the threads of morality: a good mother is a working mother. In Israel, where motherhood is glorified, the connection between motherhood and work and the imperative not to receive welfare allowances were strengthened following the reform of 2003.

The current study highlights internalization of the imperative to move from welfare to work in terms of poor single mothers' perceptions of moral motherhood. Focusing on single mothers who took part in a non-mandatory welfare-to-work (hereafter WTW) program, this study analyzes how these women perceive good mothering when they are required to respond to the imperatives of the WTW program. We examine the kinds of justifications or explanations they provide for their choices – particularly how they combine motherhood and work under harsh conditions. All participants suffer from multidimensional plight: most endure exclusion due to immigration; most reside in Israel's periphery, which offers less educational, employment and economic mobility, and less access to good jobs, fair wages, public kindergartens and public transport; and most are impoverished, working in precarious jobs with low wages and poor working conditions.

Israel provides a particularly fascinating context for examining this issue because the establishment of motherhood there has been colored by nation building and social policy vis-a-vis mothering, influenced by national-demographic interests (Ajzenstadt & Gal, 2001; Herbst & Benjamin, 2012). Thus, over the course of time, it has embraced contrasting welfare policies and public discourses regarding motherhood in general and single motherhood in particular. The competing discourses embed conflicting demands from mothers; and these are reflected in two main directions of welfare policy for poor single mothers. The first established the entitlement of single mothers to care for their children, granting them social rights and citizenship to support this path. This policy was implemented during the peak of immigration from the former Soviet Union (hereafter FSU) in the 1990s (Herbst, 2009, 2013), by the Single-Parent Family Law. While full-time motherhood was not part of the institutional design, single mothers were nonetheless expected to serve as main caregivers of their children and secondarily as breadwinners. The second, later policy mainly started with the 2003 Omnibus Law and was eventually promoted by WTW programs embedded in neoliberal discourse, which condemned the mothers' dependence on allowances, encouraging them to become breadwinners first and foremost. These legal reforms reduced entitlement and accessibility to state support in the form of allowance cuts for single mothers receiving child support (income assurance), child benefits and income support (Herbst, 2013). The reforms did not, however, supersede the motherhood model, so that while poor single mothers were condemned for their dependence on benefits and expected to work (Lavee, 2016a), even if this meant taking low-paying jobs under harsh

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conditions, they were also expected to remain devoted caregivers of their children.

This paper is anchored in the critique of WTW programs as a mediating force that promotes the imperative to put "work first" (Lewis, 2002), while marginalizing maternal care. This shift in welfare policy reflects the rise of an ideology of the masculine worker-citizen – one which abandons the commitment to support mothers' caring obligations by making work and work-related activities a mandatory condition for receiving aid (Korteweg, 2003). The acute legal changes are particularly challenging to single mothers who lack economic means and who wish to maintain moral motherhood as they perceive it (Dodson, 2013; Elliott et al., 2015; McCormack, 2005). Most of the jobs offered in WTW frameworks are "disadvantageous," saving on occupational training costs (Johnson Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2006); indeed, a study in the US found that most WTW participants are offered only rudimentary training. These conditions exacerbate gender and ethnic discrimination (Chen & Corcoran, 2010; Morgen & Maskovsky, 2003). A considerable rate of mothers who lived in poverty before WTW was instituted in the US and Canada continued to live in poverty after the reform, even after integrating into the labor market (Albelda, 2011; Bashevkin, 2002; Breitkreuz & Williamson, 2012; Morgen, Acker, & Weigt, 2010).

Research has shown that low-income mothers who participate in WTW programs internalize the imperatives of neoliberal discourse, such as economic independence, personal responsibility and self-sufficiency, trying to demonstrate a good citizen role model to their children (Manoogian, Jurich, Sano, & Ko, 2015; Woodward, 2008). Examining the narratives of Israeli single mothers from impoverished backgrounds who were participating in a non-mandatory WTW program, the current research focuses on the justifications these women give to "doing good motherhood" in an era in which welfare policy affecting single mothers has been transformed and against the background of a discourse that glorifies motherhood. In addressing this issue, we also consider how these mothers navigate between their moral perceptions and WTW policy imperatives.

### *Israeli welfare policy affecting single mothers*

Israel constitutes an important case study, not only because of changes in welfare policy (Herbst, 2013), but also because it belongs to a group of countries known as the Mediterranean welfare state regime (Gal, 2010). This regime is characterized, among other things, by the marked influence of religion on the structuring and functioning of its welfare state institutions. Marriage tends to be more institutionalized in these nations, and the proportion of single-parent households is generally much lower. These countries have also had limited success in alleviating poverty and overcoming social and economic gaps (Gal, 2010).

In light of the above, it is not surprising that the Israeli single-parent family comprises a relatively small portion of the general population – 12.4% of all families with children under 18, compared to the OECD average of 19.9% (OECD, 2014; Toledano & Wasserstein, 2014). Of all such families in Israel, 91% are headed by women (Toledano & Wasserstein, 2014), who are characterized by a higher employment rate than wedded mothers (Stier, 2011; Toledano & Wasserstein, 2014). Nonetheless, single mothers are an economically fragile segment of society, as they are the sole providers for a household with children (for Israel, see Stier, 2011; for Europe and North America, see Brady & Burroway, 2012).

Israel has one of the highest birth rates among OECD countries, with an average of 3.08 children per woman, compared to 1.68 in the OECD (OECD, 2017). Israel has the most fertility clinics in the world in relation to population size (Hashiloni-Dolev, 2006). Single women have the same rights and access to artificial insemination and fertilization as married women, which is by no means self-evident in developed countries (Hacker, 2012). Indeed, Israel has traditionally had a pronatal welfare policy. For Jewish women, motherhood has been constructed as a national mission (Yuval-Davis, 1996), as the presence of a growing Palestinian minority within state borders has led to the definition of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a "demographic threat" (Berkovitch, 1997). The state saw the Jewish mother's womb as one means to cope with existential fear (Yuval-Davis, 1996). Thus, Jewish mothers have been an inherent part of Israeli nation building, and the welfare benefits offered to them are meant to help meet that goal. Ajzenstadt and Gal (2001) argue that Israel's welfare laws have been marked by a concern for national-demographic goals and have been less focused on women as individuals who require social rights.

This nationalist discourse underlies the Single-Parent Family Law, enacted in 1992 during peak immigration to Israel from the FSU, which, among other things, expanded income support allowances for poor single mothers. The central justification for the legislation was that these mothers are taking part in the Zionist project either as immigrants to the country or as women raising its future generations (Herbst & Benjamin, 2012). The allowance is subject to strict means and employment tests, limiting support to mothers who cannot obtain sufficient income and who take on paid work of any kind. Thus, the structure of the allowance encourages low-income single-parent employment (Gal & Doron, 2000), offering compensation for mothers' childcare duties (Helman, 2011). The Single-Parent Family Law of 1992 was therefore designed to anchor the rights of single parents.

The Omnibus Law of 2003 disregarded this initial design of social rights (Herbst, 2013; Regev-Messalem, 2013). Embedded in neoliberal discourse, the law introduced cuts in income support and child support (income assurance) allowances (by approximately one third), as well as in child benefits (by approximately one half). The number of Israeli single-parent families affected by these cuts was extremely high. An amendment to the Income Support Law imposed strict means tests, radically reduced the size of the salary which entitled the worker to a supplementary allowance (the "disregard"; see Gal & Doron, 2000), and applied employment tests to mothers of children over the age of two (as opposed to seven as had been the case before), making it less lucrative to have low-paying employment (Herbst & Kaplan, 2016).

The cutbacks were anchored in a neoliberal ideology that delegitimized welfare recipients – single mothers as well as other disadvantaged segments of society – often depicting them as needy or dependent (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Herbst, 2013). The state's conception of poor women's citizenship in Israel thus shifted from an ethno-republican one, wherein rights are designed specifically for affiliation with a specific group (in this case, mothers), to a liberal-individualistic conception, whereby the sole route to full and equal citizenship involves participation in the paid labor market rather than receiving an allowance for caregiving. This created a dramatic change in the criteria for poor women's membership in society (Regev-Messalem, 2013), even though the lion's share of income among single mothers in the 1990s derived from wages, not allowances (Stier, 2011). As of the 2003 welfare reform, single mothers in Israel have been expected to serve primarily as "full-time breadwinners" for their children and secondarily as their caregivers. Furthermore, this neoliberal ideology has diffused into the personal discourse of low-income mothers. This discourse, which sets the standards for good mothering, claims that the basis for legitimacy and good moral motherhood is embedded in the intersection of intensive mothering (devotion to children) and neoliberalism (providing for the livelihood of her family) (Lavee, 2016b).

At the same time, daycare policies make it difficult for low-income mothers to take on paid work. The proportion of employed Israeli mothers with young children is 69.9% for ages 0–2 and 74.5% for ages 3–5, compared to an average rate of 53.2% and 66.7%, respectively, for OECD countries, yet the rate of public expenditure in Israeli daycare centers is only 0.2% of GDP, while the OECD average is 0.8% (OECD, 2014, 2017). Moreover, the rate of parents' financial participation in the subsidized cost of daycare is very high compared to other Western countries and there is a disparity of childcare services, so that mothers of children under three residing in the periphery (particularly in Israeli-