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Gendering Welfare: Lone Mothers' Experiences of Welfare-to-Work Programmes in Hong Kong

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Consideration of welfare regimes in Hong Kong has generally neglected gender and care work issues, focusing instead on welfare ideologies relating to production and the market orientation of social policies. In addition, traditional Chinese values place a high priority on motherhood. Drawing on qualitative interviews with lone mothers and social workers, this article considers welfare reform in Hong Kong from the late 1990s and the shift to welfare to work, examining these from the perspectives of gender. It suggests that as a result of the reforms there is a danger that lone mothers become double failures, as carers and workers.

The discussion of welfare regimes is extensive both in Western and Asian contexts (Holliday and Wilding, 2003; Kwon, 2005; Walker and Wong, 2005; Haggard and Kaufman, 2008). Ever since the publication of the welfare regime thesis of Esping-Andersen (1990), there has been much discussion of the proper classification of welfare regimes in different countries. With regards to Hong Kong, the means of classification have been evolving, but generally, there is consensus that the major function of welfare policies is for economic development. This inclination is not confined to Hong Kong, but is prevalent among welfare policies in East Asia, and, particularly, the northeast Asian countries of Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan (see White and Wade, 1988; Tang, 2000; Peng, 2002; Low, 2004; Cheung, 2009). Thus, these countries are classified as developmental states after the concept was coined by Johnson (1995). Their welfare regimes have been recently re-named as developmental welfare states (Kwon, 2005). Hong Kong is further redefined as one of the exclusive developmental welfare states where the service recipients are more characterised as economically functional groups in comparison to inclusive developmental welfare states, such as South Korea and Taiwan (Kwon, 2005). In recent years, Holliday (2000) has captured the close relationship between welfare and economic policies, and constructed a productivist welfare regime by extending Esping-Andersen's framework. Resembling the developmental welfare states, welfare programmes that contribute to economic development, such as housing, health and education programmes, and their main beneficiaries are perceived as productive programmes and productive factors respectively. Social security and social care programmes are identified as types of consumption, and thus are non-productive and/or contributing only to the legitimacy function in society. Public expenditure on these programmes are, therefore, reduced to the necessary minimum.

Discussions of welfare regimes in the west, however, have been criticised by feminist studies for neglecting gender (Lewis, 1992, 2006; Orloff, 2002; Pascall and Lewis, 2004;

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O'Reilly, 2006). Specifically, welfare regime construction is accused of neglecting the contributive role of unpaid female labour. Similarly, few studies on welfare regimes in East Asian countries, and particularly Hong Kong, have the caring work of women as the focus. Studies conducted by Pascall and Sung (2007) and Ezawa and Fujiwara (2005) are among the few that do. The former demonstrated the regulating influence of prevailing Confucian ideologies on married women in Japan, Korea and Taiwan, and their consequential subordination within the family. The latter focused squarely on lone mothers and highlighted the different expectations for married and lone mothers in relation to work and care. Lone mothers have not been the subject of research in Hong Kong.

Gender regimes form the key policy logic of welfare states in relation to gender (Pascall and Lewis, 2004). Discussions of the gendering of the welfare state should involve an examination of how women have fared in different welfare states and the acknowledgement of different policy outcomes for women and men. Across cultures, lone mothers are treated as a separate category of welfare recipients, and the politics of their entitlement is gendered. Women's lives are regulated in different ways and at various levels by social welfare policies.

The impact of welfare on women can be substantiated by examining their subjective experiences, but this is largely absent from the discussion of welfare regimes in Hong Kong. The lives of lone mothers are subject to regulation regarding paid and unpaid work by the requirements set for welfare entitlement. However, little has been documented about how the micro-processes of policy implementation subject women to regulation. Thus, rather than examining gender regimes by investigating gender equality in various domains, such as income, work, time, voice, and practice (Pascall and Lewis, 2004), this article examines the gender impact of welfare at the individual and community levels, using lone mothers as an illustration.

Two concepts are at the core of social policies regarding lone mothers: motherhood and work. The historical development of social security policies in Hong Kong, and in particular the welfare reforms of the late 1990s, illustrates the changing definitions of these concepts by the state. Welfare-to-work programmes that came with the reform have aided in the reproduction of gender roles and norms, and, thus, the responsibilities of care by women within a gender regime. The impacts of the changes on women, however, have not been thoroughly examined, although government commissioned evaluation studies of welfare-to-work programmes for lone mothers have all been positive in their conclusions. These studies were however also not informed by a gender perspective, which would place women's experiences onto centre-stage.

The authors of this paper have conducted small-scale qualitative research which examines how the state regulates the lives of lone mothers via its social welfare policies, and uses their voices to illustrate their experiences with welfare-to-work programmes. The research findings give evidence that there are contradictions between childcare and work requirements, and that welfare regimes are gendered in Hong Kong. It also echoes the call for more studies on the subjective experiences of women, and the gender aspect of welfare in Hong Kong, and, by implication, East Asia.

The study

This exploratory study was conducted between late 2008 and mid 2009. A qualitative methodology was adopted because it provides the opportunity for in-depth exploration

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of opinions and experiences. In addition to 15 lone mothers on welfare, three social workers who were providers of welfare-to-work programmes were included because lone mothers indicated that their experiences were largely shaped by their interactions with the programme staff. The perception of social workers on lone mothers and welfare-to-work programmes are explored to provide insight on the structuring of the experiences of lone mothers. Lengthy interviews, of approximately one-and-a-half hours, were conducted with each woman and social worker.

In order to achieve the research objective, lone mothers who had experienced difficulties with the programmes were referred by social workers who had knowledge about their experiences. The social workers interviewed work in these programmes and were invited by the authors to tap into their rich knowledge and experiences in carrying out welfare-to-work programmes. Although the sample size is small, the respondents are typical Hong Kong lone mothers on welfare and can provide a general picture. Questions that were asked included the history of dependence on welfare and participation in welfare-to-work programmes, difficulties experienced in programme participation, the impacts of work requirements on childcare and family, physical and psychological health and strategies adopted to combine care and work. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants. The analysis consisted of the process of conceptualising the categories and then examining their interrelationships, proceeding to progressively higher levels of abstraction as the analysis continued, and eventually reaching themes or theories that could no longer be further developed. The coding and analysis are grounded in the narratives.

From welfare to workfare

Before the welfare reform of the late 1990s, social welfare provision in Hong Kong was largely 'gender neutral'. A public assistance scheme was introduced in the 1970s as a standardised programme for those unable to support themselves. There was no differentiation in treatment according to the background of recipients, except that additional allowances were given to families on welfare for a longer time. Lone mothers on welfare could stay on welfare irrespective of their age, the age of their children and the length of their claim, as long as the family income fell below the set threshold. A strong male breadwinner model that treated mothers as primarily carers was adopted, and their employment was not seen as necessary.

Social security reform was initiated in Hong Kong after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. The government was concerned about rising public expenditure on social security, which had increased drastically from 3,687 million dollars in 1991–92 to 17,784 million dollars in 1998–99 (Census and Statistics Department, 2001, 2009). In fact, the reform came shortly after those in the UK in 1997 (Campbell, 2008) and the US in 1996 (Walker and Wiseman, 2003). Prominent dimensions of policy reforms in the West, including restricting entrance and accelerating exit, the segmentation of participants, the introduction of contractual obligations and the formulation of work-oriented measures (Gilbert, 2005) were also evident in the reform of social security in Hong Kong. The reform started with the Comprehensive Social Security Allowance (CSSA) review in 1998. Various policy changes followed, with the more precise differentiation of recipients according to their degree of capacity or incapacity to work being the first step.

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The imposition of more stringent work requirements for welfare recipients was rationalised by the drastic increase of able-bodied recipients, including lone mothers. The number of able-bodied CSSA recipients rose from 6.5 per cent of the total number of cases in 1986, to 9.6 per cent in 1996 and then to 13 per cent in 2007. The number of single-parent families on CSSA increased from 3,740 in 1986 to 13,824 in 1996 and then to 38,278 in 2007. This increase correlates with the rise in the divorce rate in the past few decades from 1.6 in 1996 to 2.54 in 2006. The number of single parents increased from 42,309 in 1996 to 72,326 in 2006, representing an increase of 71 per cent in 20 years. The sex ratio in 2006 was 255 lone fathers per 1,000 lone mothers (Census and Statistics Department, 2007).

Theoretically, all new work-first programmes in Hong Kong are relevant to lone mothers, but some specifically target them. The programme to which they are assigned depends mainly on the age of their youngest child. The first welfare-to-work programme, the Support for Self-reliance (SFS) Scheme, which was launched in 1999 and remains in place, introduced casework, contractual responsibilities and sanctions into the CSSA. It requires able-bodied unemployed recipients and those who are not working full time to sign a contract agreeing to receive employment assistance services provided by the Social Work Department (SWD), which include developing personal job-search plans, job matching, referrals to Intensive Employment Assistance Projects (IEAPs) and community work (six months of unpaid work at three days per week). Lone mothers whose youngest child is aged 15 or older are treated the same as other adults and are required to join the SFS Scheme. Mothers whose youngest child is in a full-day kindergarten are also obliged to join the Scheme and are expected to work full time at 120 hours per month earning no less than HK$1,450 (US$187) (increased to HK$1,630 [US$210] in 2009). They are no longer identified as lone parents, but as able-bodied unemployed. Lone mothers who have children under the age of 15 can also join the Scheme on a voluntary basis.

IEAPs were introduced in June 2003 and contracted out to non-governmental organisations. They targeted either unemployed recipients generally, or specific groups. A research study commissioned by the government found that these programmes were effective in helping welfare recipients. However, the analysis did not differentiate lone mothers from other recipients (Tang and Cheung, 2007). The first scheme that exclusively targeted lone parents and childcarers whose youngest child was below 15 was introduced in 2002. This was the Ending Exclusion Project, which invited participation on a voluntary basis (LegCo Panel on Welfare Services, 2001). A study commissioned by the SWD and carried out by the City University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong provided evidence of the effectiveness of the Project in terms of the amount of job-search activities and part-time jobs secured. The policy of moving lone parents on to welfare to work was thus affirmed (SWAC, 30 January 2004). However, due to poor participation (only 3,217 participants by March 2005), it was replaced by the New Dawn Intensive Employment Assistance Projects (ND IEAPs) in 2006, participation in which was made compulsory for lone mothers with the youngest child aged 12–14. Participants were required to sign a jobseeker's undertaking to state that they were willing to actively seek paid employment and participate in employment counselling, job matching, skills training and post-placement support services delivered by the project operators. To secure their welfare benefits, participants had to work for at least 32 hours per month. Those who refused or failed to participate would have their monthly CSSA payment reduced by HK$200 (US$26). An evaluation report by the University of Hong Kong on the ND IEAPs

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suggested that all of the parties involved, including the participants, their family members and their children, employers and operating agencies, had given positive feedback on the projects, and that the projects effectively helped lone parents and childcarers to find employment. The report also recommended lowering the age of the youngest child to six, lengthening the hours of work and increasing the penalty for non-compliance, despite the weak support for these changes in the study results (LegCo Panel on Welfare Services, 2007). The recommendations were not accepted by the government, but the report gave rise to the notion that welfare-to-work programmes targeting lone mothers in Hong Kong were 'overly generous' compared with those in many other places.

The Enhanced New Dawn Projects were launched in October 2007. The target groups, service content and requirements for participants remain the same as for the ND IEAPs. However, the funding mode changed from lump sum to 'piece rate', and the NGO providers were assigned responsibilities previously undertaken by the government department, including regular interviews with recipients to monitor their job search obligations. The view that lone mothers as a group require special attention is clearly evident in the government's initiation of successive welfare-to-work programmes that exclusively target them.

Defining care

The two concepts of motherhood and work that form the core of welfare policies in Hong Kong are largely cultural. Traditional Chinese values place a high priority on mothering, and childcare is treated as a maternal responsibility. Chinese women's definition of post-divorce womanhood is also largely centred around motherhood (Hung, 2002; Hung *et al*., 2003; Kung *et al*., 2004). Unpaid care work is women's work, and is largely unvalued and unshared in the Chinese society of Hong Kong (BGCA, 1990; Chu and Leung, 1995; Chu, 1997). A survey of married women revealed, for dual parent households, that in over 80 per cent females are responsible for domestic work and in over 90 per cent for childcare, while 45 per cent objected to the idea of paid household work (HKYWCA, 2005). The state's position on women's employment and the desirability of full-time mothering, however, varies with marital status, age of the children and economic status. The situation of lone mothers best illustrates the situation of welfare and gender. Without a male breadwinner in the family, lone mothers are expected to shoulder the role of earner and to work for pay. Although lone mothers' role as mothers is recognised when their children are younger than 12, they are expected to prepare themselves to become full-time workers when the youngest child reaches the age of 15. The model of the male breadwinner with full-time female carer is not challenged, but is less treasured when mothers must rely on the state.

The welfare-to-work programmes for lone parents use the language of empowerment (to overcome work barriers), social inclusion (to become a member of the workforce), capacity building (for self-help), social participation (through work and work-related activities) and self-reliance (to support oneself financially) to describe the goal of employment. The use of the term 'lone parents' rather than 'lone mothers' obscures the gendered nature of the programme, while attempting to shift the role of lone mothers from mother to worker. Although the government has been very careful to avoid the accusation that it is undermining the significance of parenting, the welfare-to-work programmes for lone mothers place a disproportionate emphasis on work at the expense of parenting.

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The image of lone mothers on welfare has changed from being 'deserving' responsible mothers to 'undeserving' irresponsible citizens who have not taken sufficient measures to solve their personal problems. However, this is not in tune with the aspirations of lone mothers. Western studies have suggested that although a great majority of lone mothers aspire to work for income and personal development, they identify themselves primarily as mothers, and will only accept jobs that fit in with their childcare and domestic duties (Lewis, 2001; Millar, 2005). The role of mother is equally important in the identity of lone mothers in Chinese societies. In the Hong Kong context, studies have revealed the difficulties for lone mothers in returning to work, and suggest that it is hard for them to balance work and childcare (Hung and Lai, 1998).

In the welfare-to-work programmes, lone mothers' attitudes and forms of mothering are subjected to scrutiny and regulation by the state through the agency of frontline social workers. Although committed mothering is viewed positively, 'over-commitment' is considered problematic and not conducive to the healthy development of children. Mothers are blamed for indulging in childcare that is not only unnecessary, but may create dependency in their children. Such over-committed mothers are viewed either as incompetent or as using childcare as an excuse to avoid work. This is evident from comments made during the interviews by social workers operating the programmes.

> They treat their children as if they are very small; helping them to take a shower at the age of 12, tying their shoelaces. (Social Worker A)

> Some think that children cannot be left by themselves. Those with more 'obedient children' leave meals for their children or ask their children to come home from school on their own. Then they can work for a few more hours. It all depends on how they perform as a mother. (Social Worker B)

In terms of domestic work, the social workers commented that 'they won't train their children [to do domestic work]' and 'they quit their job or were fired after two days … [but] cannot be scolded, cannot be blamed … their minds are only on their family'. When mothering competency is defined solely in terms of parenting attitudes and skills that facilitate work, such choices are seen as unjustified. One social worker showed some empathy towards lone mothers, observing that they may have real difficulties with childcare because of 'problems' with their children, such as the children being extremely rebellious or emotionally too attached to the mother. Here, the perspective of 'need' rather than of choice is adopted.

There are also class and cultural dimensions to motherhood in defining quality childcare. The normative standard of childcare defined by policy makers and implementers is different from that upheld by welfare recipients, who are mostly women from mainland China and those who are less educated. This study reveals that many of the lone mothers define caring as a full-time commitment to fulfil a wide range of responsibilities according to the different ages of their children. Ms Yuk, for example, indicated that caring is a full-time job in each family, irrespective of whether it is a dual or lone parent family. Many shared this view, but thought it mandatory for the latter. Many respondents felt that while caring tasks mainly involve preparing meals and supervising homework for younger children, children that are aged 12–14 years old require additional care to address their emotional and schooling needs, and to closely

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monitor their activities during the rebellious period of adolescence (Wah, Gigi, Kam, Lin and Yuet). These discrepancies in definitions of care and lone motherhood explain the tension between lone mothers and social workers who implement the welfare-to-work programmes.

Lone mothers in welfare-to-work programmes are in a double bind, being penalised by the welfare system (through reduced payments) if they do not work, and accused by wider society of child neglect if they do. This is illustrated by an account given by Ms Fong, who has been receiving CSSA since her divorce three years ago. Her son is 12 years old and is in Form One at secondary school:

> I have to fulfil the requirement of 32 hours of paid work. They [social workers] called me to work on the fifth day after the Chinese New Year [a school holiday]. They called me to work as a cleaner for four hours in the afternoon in a public hospital. You know, I had to go … I prepared lunch for my son and left for work. I told him to stay at home and wait for me. I came home in the evening but he was not there. I was very scared and went out to search for him … The police called me late in the evening, telling me that my son was in the public hospital where I had worked that afternoon. He was found loitering around the hospital area and could not explain why he was there and where he was going. He was looking for me. I have not been allowed to see my son for more than a week now. They said that it was negligent and that I may be charged with child abuse. I am really angry!

Ms Fong was treated as an incompetent mother who had jeopardised the safety of her son. Western studies discussing the cost to young children of lone mothers exchanging welfare for work suggest that the availability of childcare services that are reliable, of good quality and offered during non-standard work hours are vital to the employment of lone mothers (Cabrera et al., 2006). However, many shortfalls and gaps remain in such services in Hong Kong, which are developed on the basis of the dual-parent family model. Childcare centres for children under three are provided to those in exceptional circumstances, such as parents with illnesses. There were only 18,025 places for a population of 398,200 in 2007. Occasional childcare services for ages three to six in Hong Kong offered only 494 places in 2009–10 with a user rate of 49 per cent (Legislative Council, 2010–11), which was explained by non-availability of services for evenings and the high fees. Similarly, after-school-care programmes for ages six to 12 are provided by non-governmental organisations, but full fee subsidy can only be provided to 1,540 children (SoCO, 2010). Social workers share the observation that it is common for lone parents who are eager to work, or who must work to comply with welfare requirements, to leave their children unattended at home. For children older than 14, full-time mothering is not considered necessary and desirable, yet a child's safety and well-being is still seen as a mother's responsibility. Incidents of mothers, but not fathers, being prosecuted for child neglect have been criticised by local feminist groups (HKWCEO, 27 June 2008).

Defining work

The definition of work used in the welfare-to-work programmes has been criticised as narrow, in that it only includes paid work and work outside the home. This is of particular relevance to female recipients and lone mothers, who are more likely to join mutual help groups, commit to volunteer services and offer childcare support to others in need.

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Unpaid care work for one's own or other families is devalued. Advocacy groups have complained about the absurdity of recognising women as 'working' when they take care of small children as child minders, but not so when they take care of their own children of the same age or the children of neighbours (HKCA and WPCG, 7 September 2007).

Ms Chu recounted her experience of being challenged by social workers for accepting volunteer work:

> I take my cell phone with me because if they [the social security office] cannot find me, it is troublesome . . . they ask where I have been, why I don't answer calls. Last week, I told them that I was doing volunteer work. I was helping at a service centre doing childcare, and so missed their call. She [the social worker] said 'So, you have time to do volunteer work, why not paid work?' I was very angry. Am I not working? Am I not making a contribution? I did not say anything. It's better not to go against them.

Ms Chu was asked to report to the officer the following week, which was earlier than usual. She felt that she was being penalised for being a committed volunteer. Many respondents shared similar views that voluntary work is work and keeps them connected to society while having greater control in terms of time arrangement and commitment (Chun, Ling, Wah, Ms Fong, Ms Chu). In addition, there are those who hold a strong view that childcare and domestic work are both different types of work, although it is not recognised as so by the state (Yuk, Lin, Yuet, Wah and Ms Lau).

> Definitely, it is a job. The problem is the government doesn't think that it is. (Yuk)

> Domestic work and taking care of children is a job, though it is not paid. Why we are still required to work outside home? (Lin)

The quality of the work offered to women through the welfare-to-work programmes is another issue. Despite the success of the programmes reported by studies commissioned by the government, the subjective experiences of women on welfare tell how their lives are regulated by the definition of work in welfare policies. Statistics provided by the Hong Kong government reveal that the work secured by ND IEAPs participants was mainly low income and low skilled. From April 2006 to August 2009, 29.8 per cent of those who joined the projects were able to enter employment, with 35.8 per cent accepting full-time paid employment and 64.1 per cent engaged in part-time work. They mainly worked as service workers, shop attendants, cleaners, domestic helpers, and in other low-skilled occupations. The hourly pay rate was extremely low, mostly around HK$25–27 (US$3.2–3.5), which is much lower than the rate of HK$33 (US$4.26) recently proposed for the minimum wage (LegCo Panel on Social Welfare, 2009). The average monthly salary of HK$3,504 (US$542) represents around 33.4 per cent of the median monthly income in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2007). It is highly likely that these recipients were unable to leave welfare, and instead moved into the low-income category.

An examination of the types and content of training provided by the IEAPs and ND IEAPs shows an emphasis on work attitudes and soft skills, such as job readiness and job searching, rather than education or vocational skills. The retraining programmes offered may reinforce existing gender stereotypes. Women are trained for 'women's work' in female-dominated fields, such as cleaning and domestic help, that are characterised by low pay and job instability. Effective education and training, which are fundamental

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solutions to unemployment and poverty, are never addressed. This echoes the finding of Western studies that lone parents who are looking for higher-level jobs and special training are poorly served by welfare-to-work programmes (Millar, 2005; McPhee and Bronstein, 2003; Bok, 2004). Lone mothers also have specific needs in learning to cope with divorce and lone parenting. According to Social Worker C, the training provided by the IEAPs and New Dawn projects must be job related, but this may not deal with the more fundamental barriers to work.

Lone mothers are not homogenous. The difficulties are compounded by origin, as newly migrated women from mainland China have low levels of human capital attributes, including education, work experience, training and even health. They are disadvantaged in the labour market and in the welfare system. New immigrants who have resided in Hong Kong for less than seven years are not eligible for CSSA, although discretion can be applied for special cases. Those who have their application for assistance approved are required to join the SFS Scheme and are referred to an IEAP irrespective of the age of their youngest child. In this way, welfare-to-work programmes affect them differently. Ms Lau is an illustrative case. She is a new arrival from mainland China. Her husband passed away one year after she was granted right of abode in Hong Kong. Her daughter is now ten years old and is studying in Primary Four. She was approved for CSSA on discretionary grounds, and was required to join an IEAP. She works part-time as a shop attendant and cleaner. She recalled her experience.

> I have worked for 120 hours already but have not earned HK$1,450, the required amount. I work very hard. I am not lazy. I asked my mum to come [from mainland China] and do the childcare. I have to pay a lot to put them in a childcare centre [a childcare placement costs HK$64 per day or HK$16 for each two-hour stay]. It is not easy even if I am willing to work. It is so difficult. I don't know what will happen next month.

Low salaries are the crux of the problem. Ms Lau's extremely low pay of less than HK$12 (US$1.5) an hour means that a childcare fee of HK$8 (US$1) an hour is unacceptable. Other respondents who have worked part-time, are paid hourly rates around HK$18–22 (US$2.3–2.8). The work requirements of the project have compelled these lone mothers to perform poorly paid work. It is unlikely that they will achieve economic independence and self-realisation, the stated objectives of welfare-to-work programmes. The imposition of the value of paid work as superior has become the primary goal of welfare-to-work programmes for recipients with a low level of human capital. It has long been argued in comparative policy studies that comprehensive policy packages that include working family tax credits, integrated child credit and a minimum wage are essential to allow lone mothers to work and gain their independence (Lewis and Campbell, 2007; Siegel and Abbort, 2007).

Regulating the lives of women: workers' accounts

The lives of lone mothers on welfare are regulated by welfare policies that define motherhood according to marital status and the age of children and work exclusively as paid work, irrespective of conditions. Social workers' accounts of the implementation of welfare-to-work programmes illustrate how the state exercises control through a detailed service specification and funding model.

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In the typical workflow of a New Dawn project, after receiving a referral from the SWD, a letter is sent to invite the client for interview. If there is no response from the client, then two letters are sent. If the client still does not respond or refuses to participate, then the project informs the SWD to cut HK$200 (US$25.8) from the client's monthly welfare payment. During the first interview, the client is asked to sign an agreement. If s/he refuses, then s/he must sign a declaration stating that s/he was present at the interview, but is not joining the project. Participants are required to meet a social worker once a month for about half an hour to 'hand in' two completed job applications. If a client fails to meet the worker once a month, then the project will inform the SWD of non-compliance and HK$200 will be deducted from their welfare payment. To facilitate successful employment, the projects have established networks with employers in the district. When clients are referred to these employers, project workers accompany them to interviews. When the client secures a job placement, the project worker provides post-placement support by making a phone call each week for six months.

In most cases, the interaction is not overtly coercive. The social workers interviewed are all committed workers who showed a genuine concern for the well-being of their clients. One worker noted that she does not tend to encourage clients to accept jobs with unreasonably low pay, and stated that clients will be more 'compliant' if they feel that the social workers care.

At the time of the interviews in late 2008, two changes had just been introduced to the Enhanced ND Projects, which were likely to result in an increasing micro-level monitoring of recipient choice: the 'piece rate' funding mode and additional powers of control by those operating the project. The IEAPs and ND IEAPs were funded by the lump sum mode. Following their termination, they were replaced by the Intensive Employment Assistance Scheme (IEAS) and Enhanced ND Projects. The funding mode of these programmes links the amount of subsidy to output, which is measured by the number of service users, the types and quantity of activities offered and the rate of successful employment. Of the total cases (O-cases) taken on, 300 must be intensive cases (I-cases), with participants being required to complete 50 hours of training. Operators receive HK$3,000 (US$387) for each case that meets the requirement. For each recipient who manages to find a job and stay in it for six months (the placement period), operators receive a bonus of HK$800 (US$103).

According to the social workers interviewed, this new funding mode has put operators at risk of financial deficit. The funding received depends on the number of recipients referred by the SWD and their performance. Much 'persuasion' is needed to achieve the target number of I-cases.

> I tell the client that the SWD requires them to attend 50 hours of training or otherwise benefits will be deducted. I am not telling lies. The SWD does inform them of the requirement to attend training in general, although not the penalty. Or I tell them that attending class is better. (Social Worker A)

> In the intake interview, I identify those who could become an I-case. I do not let him/her know that s/he has a choice to stay as an O-case. If I let the individual choose, s/he would not go. (Social Worker B)

These workers also talked about the difficulties of implementing the project caused by the funding mode and the micro-management imposed by the detailed service specifications.

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Conclusion

Welfare models have long been criticised for neglecting gender. Discussion of gender regimes has seldom been conducted in Asian countries, but should involve the analysis of the differential impact of welfare on women. The implications of workfare programmes differ in accordance to the welfare context (Abrahamson and Wehner, 2006). Whilst it is inappropriate to draw wide-ranging conclusions from a small-scale study such as this one, the experiences of a small group of women and social workers have led to the conclusions that the case of welfare-to-work programmes for lone mothers in Hong Kong illustrates how the state regulates the lives of women on welfare by structuring the balance between work and childcare. Motherhood is defined according to marital status and the age of children by professionals of a different class and educational background to welfare recipients. As an alternative perspective to that provided by evaluation studies of welfare-to-work programmes commissioned by the government, this paper reports the experiences and views of lone mothers on welfare-to-work programmes and those of the programme operators. Although the evaluation studies have shown the effectiveness of welfare-to-work programmes, the subjective experiences of lone mothers on welfare, and the accounts from the social workers who implement the programmes, suggest that there are contradictions between childcare and work requirements, and as long as the work offered is low status, boring, physically demanding and poorly rewarded, there is little incentive for lone mothers who identify themselves primarily as mothers to accept paid work and become economically independent.

The experiences in Hong Kong reveal that across cultures and nations, lone mothers are the primary targets of welfare-to-work programmes and trapped in a double-binding situation that consists of family obligations and state/society expectations. In the Hong Kong case, the nature and quality of the jobs generated by welfare-to-work schemes and the lack of provision of basic education and vocational skills make it unlikely that lone mothers will leave welfare. Hence, welfare-to-work programmes will not achieve their objectives of improving the living standards and sense of worth of lone mothers, but merely become a tool to regulate those who cannot balance paid and care work. Lone mothers thus become double failures, as carers and as workers. Across different places, unless welfare-to-work approaches can address the cultural definitions of lone motherhood upheld by lone mothers, and unless there is the notion of treating childcare as paid work by society at large, the tensions between lone mothers and the state will persist.

Although it examines welfare-to-work programmes from the perspective of users and operators, this article leaves unanswered many questions that have not yet been examined in the local context. These include the types of work undertaken, childcare arrangements, the experiences and views of lone mothers on welfare about mothering roles and paid work, their aspirations regarding these roles, the micro-process of interaction with service providers, and the roles of operators in relation to the funder and the clients and their views on changes in the welfare-to-work programmes. It is particularly important to include the voices of recipients and operators in policy and programme evaluations (McPhee and Bronstein, 2003).

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