

Claiming Citizenship: The Political Dimension of Welfare Fraud

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This article exposes the political dimension of welfare fraud by investigating—in the context of the Israeli welfare reform of 2003—how forty-nine Israeli women who live on welfare justify welfare fraud. I find that women’s justifications cannot be fully explained by traditional noncompliance theories that view welfare fraud as an individual, private, criminal activity that solely reflects on the fraudster’s moral character or desperate need. Instead, women’s justifications for welfare fraud are better understood as a sociopolitical struggle for inclusion and deservedness—as a political act that reflects an alternative concept of citizenship with respect to women’s unpaid care work.

Q: You say that you don’t have enough money and you need to get by—so is it also acceptable to go to the grocery store and steal food?

A: Excuse me??? [Shocked by the comparison]. This is not the same thing. Did I steal? Did I steal? I didn’t steal anything, and I’m also not abusing the system. I’m just trying to get by . . . I won’t steal from a private person, of course, but if I can work and receive benefits I will. I’m saying it out loud!

Rina

I. INTRODUCTION

Rina¹ unabashedly justifies welfare fraud by stating “out loud” that it is perfectly fine to receive benefits while not reporting work. She has no problem admitting that she finds it morally acceptable to engage in welfare fraud, but finds it appalling and personally insulting when I compare it to other criminal activities. She perceives herself as an ethical, basically good person who is nothing like “criminals.” Similarly, Vered talks at length about herself as an upstanding person with a strong work ethic and integrity, all the while saying that she “salutes those who defraud Social Security.” Likewise, Nitza clearly sees herself as a particularly moral person who always tries to help the disadvantaged and at the same time says that she “deeply respects” those who engage in welfare fraud.

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1. Pseudonyms for interviewees have been used throughout.

Rina, Vered, and Nitza are representative of the women behind this research: they clearly view themselves as moral, good citizens, but almost unanimously justify fraudulent behavior when it comes to Social Security. To a certain extent, women justify welfare fraud due to their desperate need to survive; hence, in general, women argue that under their circumstances they have “no other choice.” But if welfare fraud is so closely linked with women’s desperate need to provide for their family, why is it not equally justifiable to shoplift food?

Traditionally, welfare recipients’ fraudulent behavior, like other individual acts of noncompliance, has been studied through the prism of noncompliance theories: (1) deterrence; (2) personal morality; (3) and social norms. According to the deterrence model, external incentives—specifically the perception of the certainty and severity of punishment—normally preclude individual disobedience (Chambliss 1969; Salem and Bowers 1972; Gibbs 1975; Waldo and Chiricos 1975; Tittle 1980). Consequently, one possible explanation for women’s differentiation between welfare fraud and shoplifting food might be that women perceive other criminal activities to have a more severe enforcement and punishment system that deter them from stealing but fail to dissuade them from engaging in welfare fraud. In contrast to the deterrence model, the normative perspective argues that people do not merely respond to external incentives, but that individuals’ behavior is heavily determined by their perception of themselves as moral beings who wish to act “the right way.” Their sense of right and wrong is prescribed by their personal moral beliefs, by the surrounding social norms, and by the extent of legitimacy they bestow on the authority (Meier and Johnson 1977; Robinson 1995; Paternoster and Simpson 1996; Robinson and Darley 1997; Grasmick and Green 1980; Mears and Kahan 1998). Therefore, according to this perspective, welfare recipients will engage in noncompliant behavior if they believe such behavior is not morally wrong, either because they contest the moral values of the specific welfare laws in question or because they believe such behavior is in accordance with the values of their community. Thus, an alternative explanation for women’s self-perception as decent law-abiding citizens and their support of welfare fraud might be that within the close community of these women, their own social norms differentiate between welfare fraud and other forms of criminal activity. In other words, within their community, it is acceptable to be involved in welfare fraud but at the same time completely improper to be involved in other forms of criminal activity.

However, these explanations do not represent an adequate understanding of the above statements made by Rina, Vered, and Nitza. They do not merely say that they are indifferent to people that defraud the welfare system; rather, they “salute” them, “deeply respect” them, and support them “out loud.” I claim that the statements by Rina, Vered, and Nitza reveal another dimension of the welfare fraud phenomenon that has been largely ignored—its political aspect. Hence, their statements not only reflect rational choice, personal morality, or social norms, but also express ideological support for these acts; saluting others who defraud the system reflects a political claim that challenges their categorization as “undeserving” fraudsters. That is, women like Rina, Vered, and Nitza justify welfare fraud because they believe the state denies them what they morally deserve. Thus, welfare fraud reveals a different perspective on who is deserving and who is not, who belongs and who does not—that is, a different conception of citizenship.

I claim that the traditional perspective—perceiving welfare fraud as an individual, private, criminal activity that solely reflects on the fraudster's moral character or desperate need—overlooks the political role of the welfare state and specifically the function of welfare fraud in creating the boundaries of full societal membership: the boundaries of citizenship. The welfare state's political function leads me to question the conventional perspective of welfare fraud—which views it merely as an individualistic criminal activity—and to investigate welfare fraud as a conflict involving the establishment of these social boundaries. Hence, welfare fraud can be not about *faking* deservedness but about *asserting* deservedness on ideological grounds that reflect different social assumptions, values, and experiences. Thus, I suggest that welfare fraud is not merely a criminal activity, or a survival act, but that it is also about attempting to alter the social boundaries. It is a political act—it is a cry of inclusion.

This article is about revealing the political dimension of welfare fraud. I do so by investigating how forty-nine Israeli female welfare recipients justify welfare fraud in the context of the Israeli welfare reform of 2003. I rely on women's personal accounts of their illegal activities. Animating their stories is an ideology—a systematic body of concepts—that serves to justify their behavior. Such an ideology may therefore consist of self-serving rationalizations of activities that they know to be criminal. Therefore, the justifications given by the women may constitute neutralization techniques that primarily reflect what they believe makes them look better in the eyes of others or protect themselves from self-blame (Sykes and Matza 1957). Research has supported the theory that people engaged in delinquent activities—from juvenile delinquency, violence, marijuana use, college cheating, and tax evasion—use common patterns of self-rationalization, such as the denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, or an appeal to higher loyalties (Matza and Sykes 1961; Priest and McGarth 1970; Thurman, John, and Riggs 1984; Haines et al. 1986; Agnew 1994). Moreover, empirical research has demonstrated that with respect to violent behavior, these justifications play an important part in supporting and enabling such behavior, especially among those who disapprove of violence and those with delinquent peers (Agnew 1994).

It is important to stress, however, that I am not claiming that the interviewees' ideology is the *motivating* factor behind these acts of fraud. My research design—asking women about their acts of fraud in retrospect—obviously cannot reveal what initially motivates people to commit fraud. Nonetheless, even if the ideology presented is merely used to legitimize these acts in retrospect, exploring the specific ways women justify their behavior is valuable. First, even if women's ideology is initially motivated—many times unconsciously—by their psychological need to feel better about their illegal activities, once it is formulated, it has its own effect on perspectives and behavior (Agnew 1994). Thus, these justifications have become an integral part of poor Israeli women's conceptualization of welfare fraud and of their relationship with the state. In addition, it is not the fact that women justify welfare fraud but *how* they justify welfare fraud that is the focus of this investigation. How people justify their criminal activities—speeding, burglary, sex offenses, tax evasion, welfare fraud, and so forth—depends on cultural understandings of what is or should be a mitigating or legitimizing consideration in a given situation, and as such it reveals interesting social values, conflicts, and processes. For example, sex offenders' justifications for

their behavior—for instance, that the victim provoked the attack with “provocative” clothing—falls under a common neutralization technique that denies the victim and claims the victim “deserved it.” However, the justification also reveals a social assessment of women’s status in society. Similarly, in the context of welfare fraud, women’s justifications reflect a common neutralization technique: that fraud is not wrong in light of the circumstances (Sykes and Matza 1957, 668). My study, however, delves into the specific conditions in which women find welfare fraud legitimate and investigates the social meaning and implications of these justifications. Hence, I approach women’s justifications to welfare fraud as a means to examine women welfare recipients’ expectations from the state—their conception of citizenship. Approaching welfare fraud from this perspective is highly revealing. It illuminates poor women’s role in a social struggle within Israeli society that up until today has gone unnoticed. Furthermore, it discloses that, unlike justifications for other forms of delinquent behavior, women’s justifications for welfare fraud carry a political claim. Hence, women’s justifications go beyond documented neutralization techniques such as “I didn’t mean it,” “I didn’t really hurt anybody,” “they had it coming,” “everybody’s picking on me,” or “I didn’t do it for myself,” and stress their moral right to receive support from the *state*. They base their justification on a political claim that society unjustly excludes them and denies them their moral right. Exposing this political dimension of welfare fraud sheds new light on the phenomenon and challenges the moral conviction that welfare fraud is objectively and unambiguously wrong. Moreover, revealing the political import of welfare fraud has important implications with respect to the way we conceive civic and political participation.

Welfare Fraud and Citizenship

For the purposes of this research, I defined citizenship broadly as a mechanism of social integration and solidarity, a social apparatus drawing the boundaries of the political community by including and excluding different groups (Yuval-Davis 1989; Shklar 1991; Beiner 1995; Shafir and Peled 2002; Handler 2004; Katz 2008). T. H. Marshall was the first to develop the idea that the welfare state constitutes an important dimension of citizenship—of the political life (Marshall 1962, 73–74). Since then, it has been established that the welfare state has two important political functions: it draws the boundaries of society and it provides a different form of political participation (Nelson 1984; Hasenfeld, Rafferty, and Zald 1987; Esping-Andersen 1990; Piven and Cloward 1993; Soss 2000; Katz 2008).

The welfare state defines the boundaries of society by creating different degrees of entitlement, which justifies different levels of services and benefits and establishes a stratified conception of citizenship (Esping-Andersen 1990, 26–29). Moreover, the welfare regime also defines the “undeserving poor”—those who do not meet the pre-supposed social requirements for citizenship—who are further excluded from society (Shklar 1991, 63). Welfare fraud plays an important part in this respect, as it unambiguously excludes from society those who are allegedly counterfeiting their “deservedness” as the “undeserving poor” (Katz 2008, 342). Hence, universally—across different welfare state regimes—the definition of welfare fraud reflects and establishes a clear

boundary between citizens and noncitizens. Thus, by determining who to award benefits, who to deny them to, and who is a fraudster, the welfare state reflects the social boundaries of citizenship (Katz 2008, 345).

In addition, feminist scholars emphasize the political importance of the welfare state because it offers alternative forms of political participation. O'Connor highlights the need to broaden our conception of political participation to recognize that "participation in the political system occurs not only through traditional loci of power but also through bureaucracies, client representative groups and social movements" (O'Connor 1993, 510). In particular, feminist scholars argue that welfare claims comprise an important form of participation for poor women (Piven 1979; Nelson 1984, 210; Fraser 1989; Jones 1990, 788; Piven and Cloward 1993; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Gordon 1994, 247; Soss 2000). Jones and others specifically emphasize female beneficiaries of the welfare state as major political participants, rejecting the minimizing of poor women's citizenship "to making what the state defines as legitimate economic claims" (Jones 1990, 788). Nelson compares women's electoral and campaign participation with their clientele activities and argues that "for many poor women, client activities are surely their regular connection to statist political activities" (Nelson 1984, 223). Soss further develops this argument by applying participatory theory to welfare claims and argues that the latter are political acts as they involve "attempts to negotiate, alter, or entrench patterns of social values and resources" (Soss 2000, 9).

However, the existing literature regarding welfare fraud has traditionally investigated the phenomenon as an individual, private, criminal activity that solely reflects on the fraudster's moral character or desperate need but that does not relate to citizenship (Cook 1989; Loveland 1989; Martin 1992; Evason and Woods 1995; Edin and Lein 1997; Rowlingson et al. 1997; McKeever 1999; Murray 2000; Sainsbury 2003; DeParle 2004; Mosher and Hermer 2005; Seccombe 2011). Similarly, citizenship literature has also overlooked welfare fraud, perceiving it as irrelevant to issues of citizenship. Nonetheless, a few scholars have suggested that welfare recipients' fraudulent behavior is due to the lack of moral legitimacy of welfare laws in the eyes of welfare recipients (Edin and Jencks 1992, 205; Tyler 2006). Research exploring the attitudes of welfare recipients only partly supported this aspect of legality, demonstrating that in some cases welfare recipients view welfare rules as being unfair, and thus do not consider them binding, while in other cases welfare recipients generally support the existing laws (Gilliom 2001; Gustafson 2011, 147; Seccombe 2011). However, there has been only peripheral examination of the basic understandings that these notions of illegitimacy rely on—welfare recipients' sense of entitlement to receive benefits from the state, and whether and why welfare recipients believe they have a right to receive state support (Gilliom 2001; Seccombe 2011, 145–47). Dean and Melrose were the first to propose that welfare fraud reflects, first and foremost, how people view their rights and responsibilities as citizens (Dean and Melrose 1996, 1997). Although they do not clearly elaborate this point, it seems they suggest that the wearing down of social rights—of state responsibility—leads recipients to feel less responsible for obeying welfare laws.

I build on the framework presented above to further develop this idea and argue that Israeli women's fraudulent behavior is a political act that carries an ideological claim for citizenship. Thus, I suggest that welfare fraud is not merely about receiving benefits unlawfully, but also about attempting to alter the social boundaries of

citizenship—about being included. Women’s justifications for welfare fraud reflect an ideological, political claim that mothers—because of their primary social contribution through child rearing—deserve state support. Hence, women justify their own as well as other mothers’ acts of fraudulent behavior because they believe that mothers are categorically denied their moral right to receive state support.

The Israeli Context of Welfare Fraud

Welfare fraud, under the Israeli Income Maintenance Act (Section 20(a)), is defined as “knowingly providing incorrect information or concealing information that he/she knows is relevant to his/her eligibility for an allowance.” Under this definition, there are three primary means of fraud: (1) concealing income; (2) concealing the regular use of a car; (3) and concealing the existence of a domestic partner.

This definition of welfare fraud is enforced through an elaborate system of investigation and surveillance (Sheref 2004; Doron 2010). Broadly, welfare recipients view this system as pervasive and hard to deceive; the vast majority of the interviewees personally knew people who had been caught. In addition, the consequences of committing fraud are harsh. First, the recipients are immediately disentitled from benefits. Moreover, they are usually disentitled retroactively, left without a stable income and with a huge debt to Social Security. Such debts are deducted from any benefits for which they might be still eligible, such as child benefits or Social Security pensions. In addition, since 2004, new sanctions have been added: disentitled recipients cannot submit a new claim for three months unless they pay a processing fee of \$100; and, if they do receive a benefit within two years after their disentanglement, they must pay a fine of 25 percent of their allowance for three months. In addition, recipients are exposed to the possibility of a criminal charge.

Moreover, the definition of welfare fraud reflects and comprises a clear boundary between the “deserving” and the “undeserving.” Hence, it determines not only the allocation of benefits but also the boundaries of citizenship by identifying who is a fraudster and signifying who belongs and who does not. This article argues that welfare fraud reflects a political challenge to these rules of deservedness dictated by the state via welfare laws. Therefore, to understand their claim, this section briefly describes the Israeli state’s conception of citizenship as reflected by welfare laws that particularly address poor women’s deservingness for benefits.

Previous literature about women’s citizenship in Israel has focused on women’s status up until the late 1990s and demonstrated that Jewish Israeli women achieve membership in society through their role as mothers. However, since 2000—when several amendments to welfare laws were passed—there has been a substantial shift in the state’s conception of poor women’s citizenship, from an ethno-republican to a liberal-individualistic conception of citizenship. In other words, since 2000 there has been a dramatic change in the criteria for poor women’s membership in society; unlike in the past, when membership was based on women’s role as mothers, currently the state rejects poor women’s care work as an important civic contribution and instead views participation in the paid labor market as the only route to full and equal citizenship.

It is conventionally argued that due to the Arab-Israeli conflict and, specifically, the Jewish nation's need to guarantee a Jewish majority, reproduction became a national mission and Jewish women's membership in the collective has been delineated by an ethno-republican discourse that emphasized women's role as mothers (Yuval-Davis 1980, 1989; Swirski and Safir 1991; Berkovitch 1997, 1999; Herzog 1999; Shafir and Peled 2002; Ajzenstadt and Gal 2001). The welfare state is one of the main social institutions establishing this conception of women's citizenship by providing broad and generous maternity benefits to support Jewish women's role as reproducers of the Jewish nation while formally and informally excluding its Palestinian citizens (Ajzenstadt and Gal 2001).² Previous literature has shown that with the decline of the ethno-republican discourse of citizenship, the liberal discourse—emphasizing women's participation in the occupational sphere—has dramatically intensified (Ajzenstadt and Gal 2001, 303–04; Shafir and Peled 2002, 20–21).³ Nevertheless, the liberal discourse has mostly made its mark on middle- and upper-class women, and the policy encouraging women's paid employment—mainly via an extensive daycare system—had limited to no effect on poor women, who by and large remained outside of the paid labor market (Ajzenstadt and Gal 2001, 303–04).⁴ Hence, while in the past motherhood was the foundation of all Jewish women's citizenship, the twenty-first century began with the vast majority of middle- and upper-class women already in the paid labor market, and only poor women relying on their role as mothers.

Moreover, as I have argued extensively elsewhere (Regev-Messalem 2011), in the current millennium—when several amendments to welfare laws were passed—there has been a dramatic change in the criteria for *poor* women's membership in society. Since 2000, there has been a substantial shift in the state's conception of poor women's citizenship from an ethno-republican to a liberal-individualistic conception of citizenship. Two particular examples of this transformation in the state's conception of poor women's citizenship are the developments in the Children's Allowance Program and the mothers'-exemption-from-work article in the Income Maintenance Act. These welfare rules specifically address poor mothers' deservedness for benefits, and the extent to which motherhood fits into the boundaries of citizenship. In the past, these benefits supported a form of ethno-national maternal concept of citizenship through generous

2. It is important to note that Jewish women were simultaneously included and excluded from the collective based on their contribution to the national mission via motherhood (Berkovitch 1997, 612). Hence, Jewish women were included as higher-level citizens than Arab-Israeli mothers, but at the same time were excluded—due to motherhood—from the genuine virtues of citizenship, which largely comprised military service. Thus, this discourse of citizenship constitutes Jewish women as “marginal citizens, or at best, as different ‘type’ of citizen” (Berkovitch 1997, 611).

3. Explaining the reasons for this social transformation is beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice it to say that the decline of the republican discourse was partly rooted in Israel's gradual integration into the global economy. Such development, accompanied by a sharp economic recession during the mid-1980s, led economically powerful elites, both within and outside the hegemonic Labor Party, to call for liberalization of the economy. Throughout this process, the Labor Party's institutions that have represented the republican discourse have gradually lost their power, and liberal institutions such as the Supreme Court, the Central Bank of Israel, the Ministry of Finance, and the business community have been empowered. For a full account of this development, see Shafir and Peled (2002).

4. In addition, similar to developments in other countries, even middle- and upper-class women who were integrated into the paid labor market remained segregated into lower-status, lower-paying jobs (Shafir and Peled 2002, 96).

allowances, reflecting the republican idea that children are a public good. Since 2000, however, the Israeli welfare system has undergone major reforms that included drastic cuts in children's allowances, and a dramatic modification to the mothers'-exemption-from-work article. Taken together with an average reduction of 31 percent in Income Maintenance Allowance rates, the support given to poor mothers has been dramatically reduced. This transformation in the state's conceptualization of poor women's citizenship provides the political context for women's justifications for welfare fraud.⁵ As I demonstrate in this article, poor women challenge these deservedness rules with respect to mothers' unpaid care work and argue that welfare fraud is justified because the state denies them their moral right to receive state support.

To establish this argument, Section II describes my methodological approach as well as introduces my research population. Section III, then, presents the findings of this research, examining women's justifications for welfare fraud via noncompliance and demonstrating the political aspect of welfare fraud as reflected in women's conception of maternal citizenship. Section IV concludes with the implications of these findings for our understanding of the phenomenon of welfare fraud and civic participation.

II. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND RESEARCH POPULATION

Methods

Research Design

This article is based on forty-nine in-depth interviews conducted between February 2008 and August 2009. By design, my sample included Jewish women⁶ who at the time of the interview—or in the past year—received an Income Maintenance Allowance (welfare).⁷ Initially, I identified potential interviewees through my personal connections with welfare recipients and community activists⁸ and then, to enlarge my sample, I used the “snowball method,”⁹ which I found invaluable for the purposes of my

5. I should stress that the methodological approach of this research cannot establish a causal relationship between the changes in welfare laws and women's justifications of welfare fraud. However, these changes are presented as an important part of the contextual understanding of women's justification.

6. I deliberately did not include Israeli Palestinians or Beduins in my sample because the relationship of Israeli Palestinians and Beduins with the Israeli welfare state is highly complicated as it entails the additional national dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In my limited sample, I could not address these complexities, but I hope that additional research regarding these populations will be conducted in the future.

7. This benefit is the main welfare program in Israel and in some ways is the equivalent of the US TANF, formerly AFDC, benefits, although it is not restricted to families with children.

8. Two years before embarking on this research, I had worked as a poverty lawyer in Tel Aviv.

9. At first, I also tried to recruit welfare recipients while they waited in the lobby of the Employment Bureau. This method was less effective because reaching out to complete strangers without any personal connections to vouch for me was much harder and created problems in gaining the trust of the interviewees and might have yielded unreliable responses to my questions. Therefore, I concluded that using personal connections was the best way to access interviewees and to enable the interviews to reach the level of depth and sincerity that was required.

research: as soon as a person the potential interviewee knew and trusted vouched for me, the interviewee trusted my good intentions, enabling the interview to reach a deep level of authenticity. Nonetheless, recognizing the shortcomings of the method and to avoid documenting an unrepresentative subculture within the general population of welfare recipients, I reached out to community activists in various cities to achieve access to different and unrelated interviewees. Subsequently, as I detail in the “Research Population” section below, the interviewees differed from one another in many significant ways. Although this is not a representative sample, the interview approach provides us with insights into welfare fraud’s complexities in ways that were otherwise impossible to achieve.

In conducting the interviews, I prepared a list of questions to ask during the interview. But it is important to point out that the interviews were more like conversations, giving the interviewees and me leeway to take the conversation down unexpected paths (Patton 1990, 293). However, in general, the interview guide served as a useful tool for structuring the conversation and framing the boundaries of the interview. The interviews took an average of two hours each and some lasted up to four or five hours. Following the interviewees’ preferences, thirty-five interviews were recorded and later transcribed; in the other unrecorded interviews, I took detailed notes throughout.¹⁰

I recognize the constraints of this research design, the two most significant of which are the number of interviews I conducted for this research and the fact that I relied on women’s own justification for illegal activities in which they themselves are most often involved. In general, qualitative research, which thrives on a deep understanding of an issue, is necessarily more limited in its scope, making it more difficult to construct generalizations. Hence, the ability to generalize or to extract policy recommendations regarding welfare noncompliance from this research is limited.

Another limitation of this study is that—because it seeks out women’s own justifications for the illegal activities—women might be solely expressing ad hoc views they do not sincerely believe in, but that they think legitimize their acts in the eyes of others, or would please me, or simply to fulfill their need to feel better about their illegal activities. As mentioned before, this research is based on the idea that investigating women’s justifications for welfare fraud discloses cultural and social understandings and processes with respect to the relationship between women and the state and thus it is revealing to learn about the *kind* of justifications women use, even if they merely express them to receive legitimization and sympathy from others.

However, as I detail below, several factors suggest that the women sincerely believed in the ideology they presented. First, my interview approach—as described above—ensured a deep level of trust and authenticity, in which it was highly unlikely that I would not notice mere opportunism. Moreover, if women were merely concerned with legitimizing their acts in the eyes of others, it was more likely that they would try to tap into the current hegemonic ideology—which strongly emphasizes participation

10. Naturally, the recorded interviews were richer in details. Moreover, they were more likely to include evidence for themes that emerged in the analysis process rather than ideas I already held coming into the research field. However, I was very strict in respecting the interviewees’ feelings and thus if an interviewee said she preferred not to be recorded, I took notes without asking for another explanation.

in the paid labor market—rather than suggesting an alternative, conflicting ideology of their own, one that would support women’s deservedness based on care rather than paid work. Accordingly, if women were solely saying what they believed would make them look better in the eyes of others, I would expect to hear them say things like “we cannot find work” or “I really am trying to work but cannot because of X, Y, and Z,” rather than “I deserve state support because caring for children is a social contribution.”

A related concern is that the interviewees’ justifications are told in order to impress or please me. This limitation is inevitable in all interview-based research and, to some degree, it is likely that the women’s statements were influenced by this dynamic. All interviewees knew that I was a doctorate law student studying abroad, and some knew I had previously been a lawyer. Moreover, many asked me whether I was a mother and thus knew that I had young children I had left in North America to perform research in Israel. All these factors suggest that in their mind, I probably represented the upper-class career woman whom they, nonetheless, directly criticized. Naturally, I made an effort to minimize these differences and create a good rapport. Different remarks made by interviewees suggest that most often I did manage to form this kind of good relationship with the interviewees. Nonetheless, it is likely that some women avoided or softened such criticism, and thus the women’s ideological justifications might be even stronger than the ones they shared with me.

Data Analysis

The findings presented in this article are the result of an analysis based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 2007). I conducted four rounds of coding. I used the first round of coding to identify recurring themes that surfaced from the data. I subsequently defined a few categorical units for analysis and then went back to the interview records for a second round of coding based on these categories. I then went to the literature, searching for a good theoretical framework for interpreting the interviewees’ notions. Such an analytical technique reduced the risk that I was imposing my bias on the data.

Research Population

The interviewees live in different parts of Israel: south and north, Jerusalem and the Tel Aviv metropolitan area.¹¹ In addition, the interviewees come from different ethnic backgrounds: the majority define themselves as Mizrahi,¹² fourteen out of the forty-nine interviewees are immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and a small

11. I thought there might be differences between big urban centers and the periphery of Israel, as well as differences between communities in big cities and communities in smaller cities (which might be more like close-knit communities); for this reason, I have included interviewees from the periphery, such as Beer-Sheva and Haifa, as well as interviewees from small cities like Ashkelon and Rehovot. However, I could not find any substantial differences between the different cities.

12. Jews (or their parents) who originated in North Africa and most often immigrated to Israel during the 1950s.

minority define themselves as Ashkenazi.¹³ Moreover, the interviewees' ages range considerably, from twenty-three to sixty-one, and the average age is forty-three. Furthermore, although all interviewees are Jewish, they did range considerably with regard to religiosity, from secular to those more religious, including two ultra-orthodox individuals.

Nonetheless, inadvertently, the vast majority of interviewees share two important traits: forty-seven out of the forty-nine interviewees are mothers, and forty-five out of forty-nine interviewees are single mothers. The high percentage of mothers is not surprising and seems to correlate with the high percentage of mothers in the general population in Israel.¹⁴ Single mothers seem to be overrepresented in my sample in comparison to their percentage among women welfare recipients. Therefore, to some degree my research may have overdocumented single mothers' perspectives and experiences rather than poor, partnered or married women. However, in many ways, single mothers comprise a good test case for women's equal status in society, as they illustrate women's ability to sustain themselves without depending on men. Hence, my research findings might be more severe with respect to single mothers but are nonetheless relevant to all poor women.

III. FINDINGS

Interviewees' Fraudulent Behavior

Thirty-eight out of forty-nine interviewees unequivocally acknowledged that they engage in some form of fraud as defined above.¹⁵ The most frequent fraudulent behaviors are working without reporting, followed by concealing a relationship with a domestic partner. These numbers suggest that the phenomenon of welfare fraud might be more prevalent than the official estimations.¹⁶ In addition, these numbers seem to be inconsistent with the existence of a severe enforcement system described above. First, I should stress, again, that my research agenda was clearly not to assess the extent of the

13. Jews who originated in Eastern and Western Europe and most often immigrated to Israel before the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. Although Ashkenazi Jews and immigrants from the former Soviet Union obviously share the same ethnic roots, immigrants who have arrived since 1990 are usually considered a different social group, as they share a different social and economic status from the Ashkenazi Jews, who mostly arrived in Israel before 1948.

14. There are no statistical data on the percentage of childless women in Israel, but it seems that this is a marginal phenomenon.

15. These numbers are based on the interviewees' statements. Hence, I did not include interviewees who did not state voluntarily their involvement in fraud. I suspect two interviewees in particular refrained from telling me that they engage in fraud. Therefore, it is possible that the actual amount of fraudulent behavior is even higher but that some interviewees refrained from declaring such illegal behavior.

16. The exact extent of Israeli welfare fraud is unclear as there are obvious methodological problems in assessing illegal activity. Social Security estimates—across all benefits—that it annually loses 5 percent of its budget due to fraud or errors (Doron 2010, 72). More specifically, the head of Social Security estimated in 2005 that among the 150,000 Income Maintenance recipients, about 7,000 recipients succeed in defrauding the system every year (Bior 2005). Although this formal estimate is low, accusations by high-ranking officials, as well as the media's intense coverage of the issue, fuels the common perception that many, if not all, welfare recipients engage in fraud (Doron 2010, 61; see also Sinai 2002a, 2002b; Bergerfreund 2004; Kara 2004; Zinger 2004; Bior 2005).

phenomenon. Accordingly, I chose qualitative methods and my sample is by no means representative in this regard. Nonetheless, there is no reason to believe that my interviewees were atypical, and therefore these discrepancies require explanation.

The findings suggest that despite the severe enforcement system, the vast majority of welfare recipients engage—at one point or another—in some degree of fraud because the level of benefits since the welfare reform of 2003 has decreased to the extent that sustaining one's family on a welfare allowance alone has become impossible. That is particularly true if you need to sustain a family with children; if you do not live in public housing;¹⁷ or do not have any form of family support, which under a strict interpretation of the definition of fraud can also be considered a form of fraud if that assistance is on a regular basis. Therefore, women first and foremost stress that they engage in fraud to survive, and that one cannot make ends meet with welfare alone. Many said: "Show us the math: how can we live on such low income?" A few stated they would like to see the ministers sustain a family with 2,600 NIS (= \$742) per month.¹⁸ Hence, the widespread prevalence of fraud suggested by my findings foremost reflects the desperate need of welfare recipients.

Moreover, among the forty-nine interviewees, forty-seven interviewees openly and actively justify women's acts of welfare fraud. Among them, eight women, who themselves do not self-report fraudulent behavior, justify other women's fraudulent acts. Thus, only two women—who both declare that they themselves do not engage in fraudulent behavior—claim that fraudulent behavior of welfare recipients is not justified under any circumstances. In the next section, I examine the interviewees' various justifications for fraudulent behavior.

Women's Justifications and Noncompliance Theories

To some extent, noncompliance theories explain welfare fraud by women, although they fall short of illuminating the full import of the phenomenon. For example, my findings somewhat support previous studies that report rational decision making on behalf of welfare recipients when determining to defraud the system (Evason and Woods 1995; Dean and Melrose 1996; Edin and Lein 1997; Gustafson 2011). The vast majority of women justifying fraudulent acts cite desperate survival needs, which are inevitable given the economic reality of a woman's inability to live on welfare alone. For example:

Look, it is not OK, but sometimes I can understand it in some circumstances. I can understand them [people who defraud] because it is really hard. And a woman scrounges to make a few extra shekels to get by . . . you can't live off of the allowance so people look for other ways. (Natasha)

17. Public housing was also cut drastically in the last two decades and, therefore, more and more welfare recipients are required to rent apartments at free-market rates.

18. This level of allowance is for a family with two children or more. In comparison, the average income in Israel is 8,503 NIS (= \$2,429).

Of course [people work]. Otherwise you cannot [survive]. Of course people don't report working. Almost nobody does. If they can—they work . . . What can we do? There is no choice. The money isn't enough. (Misha)

In addition, my research also supports previous literature arguing that clear moral values are deeply embedded in such decision making. How women choose to meet their desperate needs is thus dictated by a set of moral percepts. First, it is evident that in their calculations for committing fraud, there is little concern for the risks of being caught. This is not to say they are oblivious to the real possibility of being caught and the harsh consequences. On the contrary, all the interviewees personally know people who were caught, frequently telling stories about others who were severely punished; most of them have been subjected to investigations and surveillance, and a few of them have been caught themselves. However, they clearly state that the risk of facing punishment—even when faced with the possibility of criminal charges—does not affect their behavior but only heightens their anxiety. In this regard, my findings support previous studies demonstrating that claimants who defraud welfare agencies will not easily be deterred from doing so (Dean and Melrose 1997, 105). Moreover, it contradicts the argument of Rowlingson et al. (1997) that welfare recipients are not deterred because the prosecution of minor cases is not sufficiently publicized. The interviewees are undoubtedly aware of the risk but consciously choose to ignore it, as they have other more important considerations—mainly, their moral responsibility to provide for their children.

Recipients' cost-benefit calculations are thus deeply entrenched in a binary normative framework: the morality of welfare laws versus the moral value of needing to fulfill their family's responsibilities (Jordan et al. 1992; MacDonald 1994; Gustafson 2011; Seccombe 2011). For example, Einat talks about her illegal acts as a moral imperative urged on by her need to care for her children.

I see this as survival. I also entered a house [illegally]; I squatted. I don't say, "I stole from the state." I squatted. This is survival. Life brings you to situations where you need to do things that you wouldn't do otherwise . . . It was wrong. I took an apartment, and it was wrong, but I didn't see that. I only saw my children and four walls. (Einat)

These clear moral principles come into play in two main ways. First, the women justify irregular and low-paid fraudulent behavior but harshly criticize women who work in a full-time job or have a stable partner who sufficiently provides for the family (MacDonald 1994, 258). Second, the women differentiate welfare fraud from other forms of illegal acts, which they condemn, based on their sense that they are morally entitled to receive state support. Consequently, they make a clear distinction between stealing food from the store and defrauding Social Security. For example, Vered opposes taking food from the store but fully supports people who defraud Social Security, arguing that it is legitimate because Social Security denies people what she perceives as their basic rights. In some cases, this moral framework leads some of the interviewees not to define such acts as fraud although they clearly state that they know such acts are against the law. For instance, although Rachel knows single mothers who have received benefits without reporting that their husbands (or ex-husbands) have come back to live with them, she did not view these women as defrauding the system. She says:

I don't think people defraud. At least among the people I know. These are our rights, and we are entitled to it . . . all the girls in our group.¹⁹ They do not defraud, they need it; also, if their husband lives with them, they need it. (Rachel)

In summary, women's justifications for welfare fraud involve some level of rational choice, as well as a clear normative framework explained by noncompliance theories. However, these traditional explanations for welfare fraud miss the core belief in women's normative paradigm: they are morally entitled to receive benefits from the state regardless of current welfare laws. For thirty-nine out of forty-nine interviewees, this sense of moral entitlement is so strong that they believe that even if they are legally not entitled to such support, it is justified to commit fraud, or the acts cannot be considered fraud. Welfare fraud is not only about their desperate needs or family responsibilities that must be met, as there are various other criminal ways to meet those needs that they reject; it is also not fully explained by rational choice, as women clearly state that they are not deterred by the risk of getting caught or the severe punishments; it is also not completely explained by social norms, as it does not provide an account for why welfare recipients view this form of criminal activity as more legitimate and acceptable than other forms of criminal activity. Therefore, to fully understand their fraudulent acts, one needs to explore women's sense of entitlement for receiving benefits from the state.²⁰ Thus, I claim that although noncompliance theories explain part of the phenomenon, as described above, they miss an important dimension that also shapes welfare recipients' fraudulent behavior—the relationship between welfare fraud and citizenship.

In the following sections, I explore this aspect of women's justifications and reveal that their sense of entitlement is grounded in a collective-ideological claim for an alternative concept of citizenship that more readily supports women's responsibilities for maternal care.

The Political Dimension of Women's Justifications: Maternal Citizenship

The vast majority of interviewees (thirty-nine out of forty-nine) offer a conception of citizenship in which motherhood is a legitimate basis for full, equal citizenship. In contrast, ten women lack a maternally-based ideological component for their justifications. A couple of women lack any clear sense of entitlement; several others base their sense of entitlement on different grounds, most often on their past and present efforts

19. The interviewee is referring to a support group for women whose husbands and ex-husbands are addicts.

20. I should stress that during the analysis of the data, I tried to address directly an alternative explanation in which women's justifications are based on the distinction between acts that are directed toward the abstract state versus acts that are directed toward concrete human victims. If that were the case, I expected to find women arguing that "no one get hurts" by their acts of welfare fraud. However, as I demonstrate below, women do not justify welfare fraud on the basis of these ideas. In addition, to partly flush out these ideas, I also tried to inquire about women's view of tax fraud. However, the vast majority of women interviewed have never paid taxes and had no knowledge or understanding of the tax system and thus refused to address the issue.

to participate in the paid labor market, or on their past military service; and two women lack an ideological component as they engage in self-justification and justify circumstances only very similar to their own.

The vast majority of interviewees (thirty-nine) speak from an ideology in which maternal child care constitutes an important social contribution.²¹ According to this view, mothers—from all sectors and groups in Israeli society²²—should receive support from the state due to the child care role they perform. They argue that because children constitute the future of the state, the state has an interest in the care provided by mothers, and therefore the state has a moral duty to provide them with support. In other words, similar to the dominant perception in Europe (Gornick and Meyers 2003), the interviewees perceive children as a public good.

Caretaking of children is in the state's interest. If children get good care, they will get good education and in the end they will grow and succeed. It is obvious, isn't it? This is something worth investing in. . . . Otherwise what will be left? (Mira)

Responding to my question of whether mothers should be able to stay home and receive benefits, Sharon says:

Yes. This way her kids will grow to be good kids and productive, and won't require other forms of state care. I think it is important to think about our next generation. Healthy families are very important. Work, work, work—is that what's important in life? I think it's crazy. But I think this is where we are going.

Understanding children as a public good correlates to a familial view of the relationship between the state and its citizens. Unlike the traditional contractual view of the latter relationship, many of the interviewees offer an alternative perspective that perceives this relationship as a familial one (Jones 1990, 808). Hence, in many instances they refer to their relationship to—and expectations from—the state using phrases that are relevant to families. In particular, a few interviewees refer to the government as a parent who should provide support and set a good example for its citizens' children. Other interviewees refer to the state as the husband they do not have or the partner who has failed to support them. This metaphor supports the idea of a

21. The idea that care work constitutes a social contribution by providing better future citizens was often also supported through rhetoric of efficiency. A few of the interviewees stated that policies that do not provide the proper financial support for mothers are more costly to the state because, in the future, the state will be required to pay the costs of neglected children (i.e., the costs of criminal activities, rehabilitation or foster care, and boarding school). It seems to me that these are rhetorical attempts to respond to the public discourse accompanying welfare reform, which strongly stressed budget constraints and the budget deficit as the main motivations for reform. Nonetheless, the discourse is less about the most efficient economic solution, but instead focuses on a moral alternative to the current concept of citizenship and the relationship between citizens and the state.

22. As I argue elsewhere (Regev-Messalem 2013), the interviewees' claim presented in this article suggests a subversive and opposite interpretation to the original Zionist idea of motherhood as the basis of women's citizenship (Yuval-Davis 1980, 1989; Swirski and Safir 1991; Berkovitch 1997; Berkovitch 1999; Herzog 1999; Ajzenstadt and Gal 2001; Shafir and Peled 2002). In contrast to the traditional interpretation of motherhood as a mechanism of exclusion toward non-Jewish women, motherhood is embraced as a shared identity that prevails over women's national identity.

shared responsibility for the caring of children. Thus, women do not view the nuclear family as necessarily the primary or sole unit responsible for children's welfare; rather, the latter is a joint responsibility among the metaphorical "extended family"—the parents and the state.²³ The fact that they gave birth to their children does not mean that they are the only ones responsible for them. Lila, for example, describes how she chose to take responsibility for raising her children instead of relying heavily on state foster care.

Why did I take the responsibility to raise these kids at all? They should figure out how to raise children on 900 NIS [about \$257], and one child on 450 NIS [about \$128]. And then I would get my Social Security, I would work a bit, the kids could come visit, I would go visit them, and they would struggle to raise them. And then the kids will grow up not 100 percent good. But [instead] I contribute. I take responsibility. I want them to grow and give them to the state perfect. And God bless that I give the state great kids. So who is responsible for them? (Lila)

In the interviewees' view, there are two alternative options for the Israeli state to support women's care responsibilities. Some interviewees believe the state ought to intervene within the norms of the paid labor market to enable women to combine paid work and care work. Other interviewees believe the state should support women's care work by providing decent benefits that would make it possible for women to live in dignity while staying outside of the paid labor force and taking care of their children. However, the women's statements point to the fact that, in their view, the Israeli state fails to fulfill its moral obligation to provide support for women's care responsibilities in both these ways.

State Fails to Support Women's Care Work Within the Labor Market

The interviewees repeatedly refer to the incompatibility of the type of jobs available to them and their responsibilities as caretakers. In particular, the interviewees stress three main aspects of the working conditions of paid jobs: low wages, long hours of work, and lack of flexibility. Thus, in their view, labor force participation—under the actual conditions that they face—would necessarily mean deserting their children.

Due to low wages, many interviewees perceive working outside the home as an irrational decision. Some women simply do not think it is worth leaving their kids for such a low amount of money. Others point to the fact that they would have to pay their whole salary to the babysitter, daycare, or preschool, so they think it more sensible for their children to remain with them.

If you work, how much do they pay you? Twenty NISs an hour [five dollars an hour]. So you neglect your kids for that? It's better to sit at home "sick"; at least they'll see their mom. (Shula)

23. In contrast to the shared responsibility approach, only a couple of women claimed that children are, first and foremost, the responsibility of the parents. Ruth, for instance, says she completely agrees with the cuts in child benefits—which largely favored large families—and states that families who have economic problems should abstain from having so many children.

My kid was at home until he was three years old . . . They tried to send me to work, but I couldn't because I'm not going to give the whole salary to pay for daycare and I won't have anything to live from, you see? (Ruth)

Others emphasize the conflict between the long hours and their wish to take care of their kids properly. With tears in her eyes, Mira angrily told me that for a year she saw her three-year-old daughter for only an hour here and there, while a friend and her daughter's grandmother took care of her. Still, Mira was relatively lucky in that she was able to find free caretaking for her daughter. This is in sharp contrast to Valery's situation: she worked two jobs, and in the evening she had to lock the door and leave her three children—all under the age of five—alone in the house.

A: I was left with three kids and no money. It took them two-and-a-half months until I started receiving [support].

Q: How did you manage?

A: I worked day and night. During the nights I would leave the girls at home and go wash dishes. . . . The girls were young. Two in daycare and one in preschool. . . . For three months I didn't get anything, so what could I do? . . . With kids, I think [you should work] five hours a day, and then be with the kids, for the kids' education. How [can we educate them] if we are never at home? How can we raise them like that? (Valery)

In addition, several women point to the fact that the long hours of work are often unable to be coordinated with daycare, preschool, or school schedules. Even when some of the care is subsidized by the state, the long hours of work mean that women need to pay for extra care. As Raya says:

He [her son] was in preschool but who would pick him up? The preschool closed at 1:20 p.m. To find someone to pick him up meant that whatever I earned I would need to pay the babysitter. (Raya)

Apart from these difficulties, women are constantly concerned with the jobs' lack of flexibility. Even if a job fits with care arrangements, my interviewees have found that remaining in the job over the long term is inconceivable, given schools' vacation days, the need to attend to sick children, and other family emergencies.

I would come to a work interview, and they would ask me, "Do you have kids?" "Yes." "If they are sick, who will take care of them?" "I will." So you don't fit the job. You see? It's their right [to ask whether she has kids],²⁴ but you cannot tell me not to take care of my kids. Who will take care of my kids if not me? (Einat)

In addition to these harsh labor conditions, women also emphasize the lack of safety in their neighborhoods. Where drug addicts and criminal activity are a part of

24. According to Israeli law, it is prohibited to discriminate on the basis of a person's family status.

daily life, leaving children—even older children—unsupervised is viewed as putting them in real danger. Nurit says:

Then my two boys were fifteen and sixteen, and I almost lost them [to crime]. They became friends with the wrong people . . . I didn't have money to keep them busy with after-school activities . . . This was a really tough period. I would go in the middle of the night and bring them home. . . . They were hanging out where there were drugs. I was really scared. . . . They need to understand that kids are important; you need to be with the kids, not only to provide—to work, work, and work. Especially when there is a single parent. I feel I saved my older children. They started doing stupid stuff, stole here and there, and the fact that I was there watching them, I saved them. (Nurit)

Similarly Neta says:

I have lived in this neighborhood for twenty years. Once it was a good neighborhood; today it is really bad, really high-risk. I try to keep an eye on my kids as much as possible, but sometimes you just can't. You are at work, and you don't know what is going on. A kid is a kid, and he has his weaknesses and there will always be bad temptations. (Neta)

Therefore, according to this approach, the state fails to fulfill its moral obligation to provide support to women's care work by disregarding the conflict between participating in the paid labor market and women's care responsibilities. In particular, they point to the concrete clash within the reality of poverty, which entails raising children in unsafe and therefore stressful neighborhoods, as well as jobs with low wages, long hours, and no flexibility.

State Fails to Support Women's Care Work Outside of the Job Market

Some interviewees conceive the state obligation as supporting women's care work outside of the paid labor market. According to this view, the state ought to provide decent benefits that would make it possible for women to raise their children in dignity while staying outside of the paid labor. These interviewees' discourse of maternal citizenship is influenced by their perceptions of "ideal care" (Kremer 2007).²⁵ Their main ideal is providing nurturing, consistent care by being home most of the time. For example:

Look, I'm from the old school. I don't believe in working . . . instead of giving attention to your kids, just so you can sustain a household economically. And then try to make it right with the kids, by buying them another toy or another activity. I really don't believe in that. I believe in being with the kids. I am really with my

25. I should note that there is possibly a class difference with respect to women's ideals of care, but I cannot claim such a difference from this research. To do so, I plan on conducting future research that will compare poor and rich women's ideas of care.

kid, and I don't think of doing it any other way. I give up many jobs, for example with shifts, because I know that I don't want to lose an afternoon with him. It's enough that he is in daycare. . . . I'm sure that the mother [who works full time] is very miserable . . . because if her kid comes back home with a key, or I don't know how, he doesn't have a warm meal to eat, or he'll go to after-school activities and she needs to pay extra for that. She works to pay to keep him busy for a few more hours. And then later they will both arrive home exhausted, and she definitely won't be able to give anything to him. But she worked to keep them busy. I'm not for that. I don't think this is right. (Sharon)

In Rina's view, having a career is incompatible with being a good mother to your children.

I also don't want a career. I don't want a career on my kids' account. It's not worth it, having a career and bad kids. It's not worth it. And nobody can convince me that [career and kids] go together. One is on the account of the other. Nobody can convince me otherwise, unless it is a part-time job, and then it is possible. But to work up until 5:00 p.m. and then to be there for your child? The only thing you want is for them to go to sleep already. (Rina)

Poor women strongly emphasize the importance of motherly care and believe that neither the state nor the market can substitute for such quality of care. Moreover, these beliefs are not related to the actual quality of state services. Indeed, I could not find any traces of women feeling stressed over the need to have longer daycare hours, or that the actual quality of care is inadequate. Instead, they articulate their need to receive more generous benefits that will enable them to raise their children with dignity while staying outside of the paid labor market.

Poor Israeli women's claims for citizenship are aligned with feminist critiques of welfare states' prevailing concept of citizenship that challenge the exclusion of maternal care responsibilities from the definition of the ideal citizen (Pateman 1989, 185). Hence, women's justifications for welfare fraud convey not merely a collective ideology but a gender-based ideology that contests the state's definition of "citizen" based on the experiences of independent men supporting themselves through paid work (Pateman 1989; Jones 1990; O'Connor 1993; Orloff 1993; Lister 1997). Their claim for recognition of their social contribution through caretaking unmasks the false universalism of the independent "worker" and "citizen," disclosing the inapplicability of the citizen-worker model to the lives and experiences of women (Nelson 1984; Pateman 1988; Lister 1997; Tronto 2001). These findings—which highlight women's unpaid caretaking of children as a necessary social function for ensuring our future generation of workers and citizens—provide a bottom-up support for feminists who argue that worker "independence" is disingenuous because every worker is necessarily either previously, currently, or in the future dependent on the care of others (Knijn and Kremer 1997; Harrington 1999; Tronto 2001; Kremer 2007). Thus, the interviewees join feminists' call to expand the characterization of who is a citizen to encompass women's unpaid care work. In line with feminist models suggested in the literature, some interviewees point to the need to change the paid labor market norms in order to better address workers' care responsibilities (Williams 1989, 833–34; Schultz 2000; Schultz and

Hoffman 2006). Other interviewees stress that caring for children requires—and deserves—the support of the state outside of the paid labor market; thus, poor women’s discourse also supports feminists’ models that view caretaking as a worthy social contribution in itself (Kittay 1999; Fineman 2001; Kittay 2001; Tronto 2001).

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main contribution of this study is in describing and exploring the phenomenon of welfare fraud as a political act reflecting women’s conception of citizenship. These findings disclose that women’s conception of citizenship, based on motherhood, is an important part in women’s justifications of welfare fraud. Thus, in the interviewees’ view, motherhood constitutes the basis for their citizenship: the basis for their moral sense of entitlement from the state. This is not to say that they do not give other explanations and justifications for their fraudulent behavior, the most common one being their acute need for financial support. Nonetheless, at the core of their justifications is the strong belief that, as mothers who take care of young children, they are deserving of financial state support. Women’s sense of moral entitlement is so powerful that although they view themselves as upstanding, law-abiding citizens, they almost unanimously justify welfare fraud.

I show that the women’s justifications entail a political dimension by containing a claim of entitlement *toward the state* that extends beyond their particular circumstances and reflects a broad social claim. Their claim taps into the fundamental political question of who is a citizen; it is about exclusion and inclusion. In the women’s view, the Israeli state does not recognize their civic contribution as mothers—does not recognize them as full equal citizens. I show that the women’s justifications of welfare fraud carry a gender-based political claim that challenges the hegemonic concept of citizenship that is solely based on the experiences of men. The proposition of motherhood as a foundation for citizenship is not a new thought in itself—not within the tradition of citizenship and not within the Israeli context (Offen 1984; Tronto 1987, 2001; Jones 1990; Pateman 1992, 20; O’Connor 1993; Orloff 1993; Lewis 1998; Kittay 1999; Daly and Lewis 2000; Fineman 2000; Schultz 2000; Siim 2000; Williams 2000; Fineman 2001; Kittay 2001; Daly and Rake 2003; Kremer 2007). Nonetheless, disclosing women’s conception of maternal citizenship as the basis for their justifications of welfare fraud is highly illuminating because it reveals the political dimension of welfare fraud. This point of view shifts our understanding of these private acts and reveals that such acts carry deep political meaning. It demonstrates that welfare recipients’ fraudulent acts cannot be fully explained as individual opportunistic criminal acts; rather, they are better understood as women’s struggle for equal societal recognition.

Understanding welfare fraud as a political act that carries a gender-based ideological claim has several implications for our understanding of welfare policies and citizenship. First, exposing the political dimension of welfare fraud challenges the prevailing perception, which views the definition of welfare fraud as an objective, neutral concept. Women’s ideological justifications for welfare fraud—arguing that society unjustly excludes them and denies them their moral right—demonstrate that the state’s classification of who is a “fraudster” is not an impartial decision, but reflects and reinforces a

specific political view of who is, and who should be, a deserving citizen—a political perception that is based on the life experiences of men and excludes women from full societal membership. Hence, this research provides bottom-up support to feminist theorists' claims regarding the false universalism of citizenship as manifested through the definition of welfare fraud (Pateman 1989; Jones 1990; O'Connor 1993; Orloff 1993; Lister 1997). Moreover, recognizing that welfare fraud is based on predisposed gender assumptions entails general implications as it undermines the widespread conviction that welfare fraud is unambiguously morally wrong.

Moreover, these findings broaden the conventional understanding of civic and political participation to encompass women's experiences, ideologies, and struggles more fully. This study highlights that practices taking place in the private sphere—which are regularly ignored by citizenship and political participation literature—may carry important political import and as such constitute another form of civic involvement. Hence, it supports feminists' criticism against the narrow definition of political participation, which strictly upholds the public/private divide and thus excludes women's activities and practices in the private sphere (Jones 1990; O'Connor 1993; Orloff 1993; Lister 1997; Tronto 2001). Recognizing and studying these seemingly private acts as acts that carry important political meaning can be vital to the investigation of disadvantaged and marginalized groups who have less access to formal forms of political participation and thus might use these unstudied forms of engagement as their only way to voice their political claims. Disclosing and giving voice to these unheard claims is an important contribution in itself, but acknowledging them as political acts is also the first essential step for examining the political effectiveness of this form of action and the required features to mobilize these acts to create change, including the relationship between these individual acts and collective action (Piven 1979; Scott 1985; Handler 1992; McCann and March 1996; Gilliom 2001; Gustafson 2011, 176).

Nonetheless, this study leaves several unanswered questions that require future investigation. First, it is an open question whether the findings of this research are particular to Jewish-Israeli women welfare recipients or whether they represent Israeli women's conception of citizenship more generally. Is such an inclusive conception of citizenship held by lower-class women alone, or is it shared by Jewish women in general? Do Arab-Israeli women hold a similar conception of citizenship? What might explain the existence or absence of women's solidarity? Are these differences dependent on class?

Second, it is unclear to what extent these findings are applicable to other forms of legal noncompliance aimed at the state. In other words, do other covert private forms of noncompliance—such as tax evasion, subsidies fraud, or illegal constructions—contain ideological, political claims of citizenship? If so, are there any substantial differences between the claims? Would justification of tax fraud express notions of exclusion and a struggle for inclusion similar to the claim made by welfare recipients?

In addition, this study cannot answer whether its results are the product of particular developments within Israeli society or whether they reflect an intrinsic element in the relationship between the state and welfare recipients. This research cannot answer this fundamental question, which would require a systematic comparative study investigating justifications for welfare fraud in different countries. It would be interesting to explore in future research, for example, whether African American mothers' justifications of welfare

fraud contain a political claim of entitlement toward the state. If so, what would be the basis for their claim? Would their justifications tend to be based on a republican conception of their role as mothers or would their justifications be different, reflecting the more liberal-individualistic cultural understanding that is characteristic of the United States? Would women welfare recipients in the United States translate their sense of moral obligation to provide for their children to a legal right vis-à-vis the state, or do they see the care of children as their private individualistic responsibility? Would they entail a different political claim based on their participation in the paid labor market? Accordingly, a possible hypothesis is that welfare fraud inherently contains a political component, but that the content of the political claim—for example, the assertion for state responsibility for the care of children—might be dependent on particular cultural values and understandings. A competing hypothesis would be that welfare fraud does not essentially entail a political claim that reveals a broader social claim such as class, race, or gender exclusions. Hence, justifications may lack a sense of entitlement to receive benefits from the state that goes beyond protecting the fraudsters from self-blame and thus justifying conditions only very similar to their own.

Finally, this study calls for additional exploration of the relationship between these individual acts and political mobilization. What effect, if any, do these acts have on the state? What is the relationship between these individual acts and collective action? Do these acts constitute social resistance? What would be required to mobilize these acts to create social change and to force the state to respond to these claims?

Nevertheless, by exposing the political component of welfare fraud in the context of the Israeli welfare reform of 2003, this research provides an essential new perspective for the examination of individual legal noncompliance in many different contexts. It suggests that activities we most often view as individual criminal acts might contain important political meaning. Exposing and voicing these claims is especially important when examining groups that historically have been marginalized, as these covert acts might be the only means by which these claims are expressed. Moreover, disclosing the political meaning of these acts undermines the objectivity of legal rules, revealing the possible social biases and supporting the social construction of deviant behavior—the construction of the social boundaries. Furthermore, revealing the political component of illegal acts possibly suggests that to minimize such illegal activity effectively, societies may perhaps also need to resolve the basic claim made by the group members—their claim for inclusion.

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