

# The Impact of Common Responsibility for Individual Parents

Prabhakar Esam

*Department of Sociology, Osmania University*

**Abstract-** Common responsibility is located within a neoliberal socio-political framework of policies designed to structure an ordered and 'disciplined society' emphasizing strong work-ethics and self-reliance. This article presents findings of three qualitative studies into welfare-recipient experiences under interventions allied to common responsibility. The studies were of 14 (2000), 32 (2007) and 15 (2014–15) individual mothers in receipt of Centre link payments. Participants voiced concerns over interventions targeting individuals predominantly already contributing in essential roles, fear of misdirected coercive punishments, increased stigmatization, a lower real standard of living and unimproved prospects for suitable employment. The article explores past and present rhetoric and implementations of common responsibility policies, and their impacts for people receiving welfare benefits. Ongoing critical analysis of such interventionist policies is essential to ensuring that the ostensible goals of addressing poverty and disadvantage are achievable and without excessive unforeseen consequences to society. Are they in the interests of social justice and stability?

**Index Terms-** Data Analysis, Family, One-parent families, Qualitative Analysis, Welfare State.

## INTRODUCTION

The notion of linking welfare payments to participation in public and community work, and training programs' requirements have been at the forefront of debate and policy change in India with terms such as 'common responsibility' emerging in the welfare context both in India and Internationally. Common responsibility programs in India, Australia, the UK, the US and elsewhere have all attempted to reduce the number of people receiving welfare payments, they follow the global neoliberal trend in politics. Neoliberalism supports policy that aims to create a disciplined society valuing law and order, individualism, self-reliance, competitiveness,

enterprising abilities, a sense of duty, trade freed of government regulation and minimal welfare. In the context of Indian welfare policy, common responsibility requirements refer to:

"The general principle that it is fair and reasonable to expect unemployed people receiving activity tested income support to do their best to find work, undertake activities that will improve their skills and increase their employment prospects and contribute something to their community in return for receiving income support".

As for governments internationally, common responsibility programs reflect the Indian government's growing concern with what is often perceived 'welfare dependency'. From the neoliberalism perspective, 'welfare dependency' is viewed as being a significant problem that creates social and economic harm, restricts economic growth, and disrupts cultural values and social order. For the purposes of this article, common responsibility is an intervention driven by neoliberal ideology, to imbue in welfare recipients a so-called healthy work ethic, so they meet perceived 'duties' of working hard, paying taxes and thus contribute 'acceptably' to society. In Australia in the past two decades, both Labor and Liberal/Coalition governments have progressively introduced stricter constraints on that receiving income support. In 2000, besant wrote that individuals are increasingly obliged to demonstrate 'a sense of duty' this was evident in the Howard-led Liberal/Coalition government's adoption of the concept of 'work-for-the-dole', a manifestation of common responsibility. Under the present Liberal/Coalition government, rhetoric concerning common responsibility is again being expounded.

Initially impacting solely on people receiving unemployment benefits, discourse on fulfilling notional responsibility increasingly refers to all on

welfare benefits, including sole parents and even many with disability. Andrew Forrest's report (2014), *Creating Parity*, commissioned by the Liberal/Coalition government, was originally intended to report on how to 'create parity' for Indigenous Indians. However, Forrest extended the recommendations to include all Indians qualifying for welfare benefits, one of which included applying common-responsibility requirements to all payments for those who are of working age and capable of work (i.e. all payments except the age and veterans' pension). Populist common responsibility rhetoric commonly focuses on duties of the individual rather than on duties of others, including governments. Yeatman (1999) points out that, in actuality, the principle behind common responsibility is that business and government also have responsibilities and duties, and that individuals have basic rights, not just duties. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), of which India is a signatory, Articles 23(1, 3) and 25(1), states:

"Everyone has the right to protection against unemployment; to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control ... and everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection".

When exploring the situations of people receiving welfare payments, it is clear that their basic human rights – including protection against unemployment, access to just and fair remuneration for work undertaken, and adequate levels of income support to prevent poverty – are not being satisfactorily met. Currently, the presence of over 105,000 homeless underscores such failure there are approximately 13% of people in India living below the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) poverty line of 50% of the median wage. We have to remind people that we in the Liberal Party are the party of human rights.' From a social justice perspective, it is important to determine how people who are experiencing the exigencies of

depending on welfare benefits apprehend their own positions within society, specifically in relation to 'meeting responsibilities'. Without such determinations, the worth of interventions such as common responsibility remains masked, and actual poverty and disadvantage levels continue and may grow

In this article I draw on findings from three studies, two of which were conducted as part of higher degrees within a Social Science program in 2000 and 2007, which explored sole mothers' experiences and concerns, including how welfare recipients perceive their situation. The third study was undertaken to gain a contemporary understanding of the situation. While individual mothers are among the most disadvantaged groups in Indian society. I also acknowledge the impoverished situations of other vulnerable groups such as Indigenous Indian, women affected by domestic violence, refugees, people with disabilities, young and older people, single people, carers, as well as a number of individual fathers and others.

#### CONTEXT OF THE STUDIES

Each study was timely and important because, in each instance, changes were afoot for welfare recipients. In 2000, the Indian government had identified 'welfare dependency' as a major concern, and commissioned report to review the Indian welfare system and identify possible interventions to address the welfare problem (Besant, 2000). The 2000 study was undertaken prior to the 2001 Federal Budget, but after the release of the report (2000), when the introduction of common responsibility requirements for sole parents appeared inevitable. Consequent legislation required sole parents to enter into paid work and/or meet common responsibility requirements when their youngest child turned 13. Further welfare-to-work legislation in July 2006 brought these responsibilities forward to when the youngest child reached 8 years of age, simultaneously transferring them from the parenting payment to the lower-paid unemployment benefit, which required recipients to undertake 15 hours of approved common responsibility activity per week. Currently, proposed changes to requirements for receiving welfare payments advocate increased common responsibility and job-seeking activity for a

wide range of welfare recipients, including individual parents.

#### COMMON RESPONSIBILITY: IDEOLOGY AND RHETORIC

Common responsibility involves what has been termed compulsory volunteerism, where welfare recipients are compelled to participate in voluntary work and/or another authorized activity, through coercive measures including fines and withdrawal of welfare payments (Yeatman, 1999). From this neoliberal perspective, welfare is believed to jeopardize the effective functioning of the economic system as a result of lowering peoples' desires to improve their own and their families' material situations. Additionally, people are perceived as needing to work hard, pay taxes and therefore contribute to a stable, harmonious society and an ordered economy. In this way, welfare is seen to impact on the apparent 'natural dynamic of the economy'. Hence, a strong workforce is seen as ensuring a strong economy. The concept underlying common responsibility, where people are required to fulfill duties, is linked with classical liberalism, operating on an historical belief that society is founded on a (theoretical) social contract. Liberalism assumes citizens have given their consent to be governed, and this consent is considered necessary in order to establish a legitimate system of law and authority; one that ensures order, safety, economic stability and national security. Belief in a hypothetical social contract has been appropriated by contemporary neoliberal rhetoric, for example, in Forrest's discussion of the merits of common responsibility when he states that 'unconditional welfare provides no clear incentive for a person to fulfil their social contract as a community member'. Classical liberalism emphasizes individual choice and freedom constrained only by sufficient governmental interference to ensure order and security. Individual freedom is seen to foster competitiveness and entrepreneurship, leading to economic efficacy. A strong work ethic is deemed necessary in order to be competitive, and therefore successful. Individuals are free to pursue personal financial wealth creation; indeed, individuals must pursue wealth creation in order for government to provide economic and social security. Underlying this belief is a version of

Rousseau's paradox of the 'necessity of forcing individuals to be free'. The consequence is a conviction that the economy must be managed effectively through legitimate and consensual authority so it can provide the resources to maintain and secure the state. From a contemporary neoliberalist perspective, it is important that individuals not only 'choose' personal paths to economic wealth, they must also adopt the dominant morals and social norms prescribed by government and intended to control behaviour.

It focuses on restoring social norms, as though they had been lost; and ensuring 'adults are in work, children attend school every day, communities are safe and the responsibilities that come with receiving welfare payments are complied with', as though these were ideals attainable solely but inevitably through devotion to one true knowledge. Forrest stresses the importance of welfare recipients' understanding and complying with their responsibilities to active citizenship. Establishing, as a social norm, an expectation that welfare recipients will have enterprising attitudes, values and beliefs, is paramount to supporters of this ideology. Scrutiny thereby falls on duties of the individual rather than on duties of government, distracting inquiry away from government's responsibility to ensure the basic human rights of all Australians, including protection against unemployment and adequate levels of income support to prevent poverty and homelessness.

#### METHODOLOGY

The three studies are positioned within a feminist, interpretive approach to research and sought in-depth understanding of individual experiences and their subjective meanings from participants' perspectives. All studies involved in-depth interviews with individual mothers, the first two studies were of 14 (2000) and 32 (2007) women, with the third study (2015) involving 15 women. All studies received ethics approval from the researcher's research institution. Pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity. Interviews included open-ended questions about experiences on a broad range of issues, including those related to common responsibility requirements, living on a low income, and housing-related concerns such as living in housing-related stress. Starting with personal

contacts, snowball sampling was used to access participants. As a sampling technique, snowballing is a useful method to contact groups of people, such as low-income sole mothers, who may be vulnerable and stigmatized in their everyday life. In keeping with snowball sampling guidelines, each participant was asked if they knew someone who would be prepared to take part in the research. In all three studies, participants ranged in age from their mid 20s to their early 50s, with the number of children of participants ranging from one to four (average two children). All participants were either studying and/or working, either on a part-time, casual or voluntary basis, and all were receiving a Centre link payment. The studies used an adaptive grounded theory approach to process and analysis. Comparative and inductive analysis was used to interpret underlying and recurring patterns and meanings in participants' responses and accounts. Accordingly, understandings and propositions were developed directly from participants' own constructions of meaning, and subsequently theorized with reference to relevant literature. This approach facilitated detailed analysis of the ways in which participants understood and negotiated their everyday life, and how these were located within the context of their broader social, cultural, economic and political worlds.

#### FINDINGS THE 2000 STUDY

Participants in the 2000 study said that common responsibility requirements for sole parents would compound welfare-related stigma, and they feared coercive measures, such as fines, would exacerbate their already tenuous financial situation. They spoke about how such an intervention would increase anxiety levels and jeopardize mental health. All participants were already involved in activities outside the home, either in paid work (mostly part-time and/or casual employment), volunteering or studying. Thus, the idea behind this intervention was generally seen by participants as unnecessary. Several voiced concern that it would not change the status quo, as one participant, explained:

“The rich will stay rich and the poor will stay poor. There won't be any changes, everything will stay the same. It just means that we'll be expected to do more even though we're already doing it all on our own”

Around half the participants spoke about how such schemes reinforce populist 'dolebludger' rhetoric, and the notion that people receiving welfare payments lack a work ethic. They believed this would intensify individual pressure and social stigma. Most participants were emphatic that they did not lack a strong work ethic. Clare was particularly angered by the implication that single parents are not sufficiently productive: Look, I work hard already, I'm an independent person. I don't need someone telling me to work hard. I don't need to be threatened to do what I'm doing already.

Within existing rhetoric, to be seen to be fulfilling one's responsibility one must be involved in paid work and also spoke of many individual parents she knows being totally involved in their communities adding that she felt the term common responsibility was itself contradictory:

“How can it be voluntary work when it's being forced on us? Voluntary work is something you do because you want to, not because you have to. It's a contradiction, it doesn't make sense! And where are all these jobs anyway? It's hard to get any work, but even harder to get work that fits in with school hours. There need to be incentives so that more real jobs can be created, and more child care. Otherwise it's just a waste of everyone's time and money”. Several other participants also lamented what they saw as a lack of job-creation programs and incentives to create more 'real jobs'. Similar issues were raised in the subsequent studies.

#### THE 2007 STUDY

While participants in the 2007 study discussed parallel issues to those in the earlier study, they also highlighted the additional concern of being closely watched. They spoke about feeling that their lives were increasingly being regulated within an institutionalized and bureaucratic culture of surveillance. Anne and May spoke about being controlled, watched and monitored as welfare recipients:

“It seems like you're constantly being treated like a child when you're on welfare, always being watched. Even though the irony is that, as a single parent, you've done a bloody good job and a harder job than if you'd had a partner. On one hand they're saying that you have to be a good citizen, do your common

responsibility, and on the other you have to be constantly on the lookout because you know you're being watched and that makes me nervous. It just feels very controlling".

I feel like a criminal. I mean what a manipulation. Wealthier parents aren't controlled like this. The scrutiny I'm under. It doesn't make me feel like taking control, it's the opposite. I feel anxious and nervous a lot of the time. You have to have a case manager as well because you supposedly need to be managed as if you can't do anything yourself, which is pretty degrading. Participants clearly experienced disempowerment and nervousness created by increased scrutiny, and noted that this does not provide a nurturing and motivating environment. Common responsibility programs go hand in hand with a sense of coercion which participants said impacts on their sense of control and autonomy. Stacey had been transferred from the parenting payment onto the new start (unemployment) payment, with its more invasive scrutiny and reporting. Lessened control of her own life was internalized through erosion of self-confidence and ability to cope, and fear of homelessness, through unwitting breach, exacerbated her stress:

They want to know everything, check everything, and if I make a mistake they may cut me off. So I worry because then we'd be out on the street, we couldn't pay the rent. It's pretty scary, like I haven't got any control over my own life. You have to fill in the names and addresses of the places you've contacted to find work, but there aren't any jobs. I just have to try not to get too stressed by it, worrying that I'll be cut off benefits. And, telling them all my personal stuff, having no control over my personal life.

#### THE 2015 STUDY

Again, participants raised similar issues to those in the earlier studies, including increasing concern about further coercive procedures, increased mental illness and poverty for welfare recipients. As in the previous studies, participants believed that people were already undertaking useful roles within their communities. Participants said they felt extremely anxious about future employment prospects and financial concerns. Carol said:

"I'm in so much debt and I'm always worried and anxious, always. I worry about my children and what

will happen to us. How are we going to survive? I literally have enough for rent, food and that's pretty much about it. Not even enough for food mostly. So I've had to get St Vinnie's vouchers. You have to play a bit of a game when you go there, pretty much the 'good girl' game. I've found there's a lot of judgment. You've got to make sure that you're calm, that you're not angry.

Carol identified the need to present herself in a positive light when accessing services in order to receive assistance and this was an issue also raised by Mazza:

"So now you get people saying things like 'I'm trying to do the right thing and look for work', it makes people feel terrible about themselves. If people are unemployed then they must be lazy, and people are telling them that they're lazy and that it's their fault. But there are no jobs. They've taken all the jobs offshore. So if you go in to a service or somewhere, or to centre link or to your case manager, you have to seem like you've got it under control, you've been looking for work, doing everything right".

Several others similarly spoke about the need to give a positive impression when meeting with case managers and centre link employees due to amplified expectations (responsibilities) for receiving welfare payments. Things have just become so hard, so tough. Around here there're so many people on welfare, but you still have this feeling that things are getting worse. And with common responsibility and having to look for so many jobs, I don't know, it all seems pretty intense to me. I'm so stressed. I'm sure it didn't used to be this bad.

Thus there was a general view that resentment towards people experiencing unemployment has increased markedly. Belinda agreed that negative attitudes towards people receiving welfare payments were becoming harsher: The belief behind common responsibility is that the government and the tax payers need to remind the unemployed what losers they are. They need to have case managers and do this common responsibility so that they know what losers they are. It just builds division and resentment and it promotes hate, it's a tougher and harder attitude now. So it's built this resentment up quite a few notches.

#### DISCUSSION

Participants in all three studies challenged the efficacy of interventions such as common responsibility, particularly given that they were already engaged in activities such as paid work, and/or volunteering and/or studying, in addition to the immutable responsibilities of care for their children. Furthermore, participants noted that being a parent and taking on the caring role is no longer viewed as valuable in today's Indian. Like the participants in these studies, others have similarly pointed out that sole parents are already 'contributing' to society, not only as parents but also undertaking community work. For instance, Blaxland (2008) and Grahame and Marston (2012) have pointed out that many sole parents in receipt of welfare payments were already undertaking the kinds of activities that would meet the participation requirements for these payments in addition to their parenting roles.

#### CONCLUSION

Across much of the globe, the politically dominant neoliberal ideology considers paid work to be a person's key contribution to society and demonstration of citizenship; unpaid work, such as caring, is less valued. Though many work as volunteers in the community, or care for children and other family members, people receiving welfare payments are vilified as morally deficient. The three Australian studies discussed here highlight how the nation's prevailing political attitudes are becoming less compassionate towards welfare recipients. This is reflected in more pejorative government language and increased regulatory requirement for participation through common responsibility, such as is outlined in the report. Such compelled social change warrants urgent and ongoing public debate on attitudes and beliefs pertaining to advantage, disadvantage and notions of fairness and equity, especially in regard to welfare, welfare interventions and welfare-related policy generally.

Common responsibility programs fail to address poverty. Without determining how those experiencing the pressures and constraints of dependence on welfare benefits understand their situations, the worth of interventions such as common responsibility remains supposition, and actual poverty and disadvantage levels are maintained and may increase. This article highlights

the continuing cultural injustice of pursuing policies based on narrow cultural stereotypes of sole mothers and others receiving welfare. Consequently, and in order that our society may attain and preserve some semblance of social equity, justice and stability, there is an unprecedented need to study and ascertain the impacts on experiences and situations of those on low incomes and those most impacted by contemporary welfare-related policies derived of politics without empathy. Wider understanding of the role played by structural factors, adverse life circumstances, accumulating poverty and disadvantage in contributing to participants' situations may help counterbalance negative social discourse and policy attributing failure to individuals, while venerating self-responsibility.

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