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## A sense of entitlement? The (gender) subtext of 'lifters not leaners'

The [Coalition's pledge](#) to revive work for the dole and income management has reignited the inevitable claim that those receiving welfare have a 'sense of entitlement'. The Prime Minister-elect's own pledge to build an Australia of 'lifters not leaners' is indicative of this. The gist of this claim rests in an assumption of the moral or psychological deviance of welfare-recipients that itself is an unacknowledged and uninterrogated ideological stance.

The pejorative 'leaners' demonises those on welfare while framing the struggle over needs in a way that avoids engagement with the structural change that is required genuinely to bring along all in society in a common endeavour.

### How we came to judge 'dependent' citizens

Nancy Fraser in her book *Fortunes of Feminism* traces the keyword 'dependency' in the context of the US welfare state of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In pre-industrial English society, dependency was inferior but not deviant. Households would consist of both family and servants, where the servants, women and children were dependents. Their dependent status was political as they were disenfranchised and legal to the extent of married women's lack of legal personality and inability at law to hold property. Consequently too, their dependency was economic.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Fraser argues that independence and dependency were radically democratised and indeed certain dependencies became deviant and stigmatised. Where independence had previously been deviant, the American colony's expression of independence and indeed the citizen's (political) independence were valorised. The waged worker's economic independence was likewise 'natural and proper'.

In contrast, the pauper in the context of emergent capitalism and the link between pauperism and poverty struck a 'moral and psychological' register. The [Poor Laws](#) were an attempt to deal with the economic dependence of paupers, but in a way that reinforced the deviance and marginality of these people.

In this era the colonial native and slave while inside the economic system and therefore appropriately dependent, were attributed as morally and psychologically inferior as a means of justifying their subjugation.

Paupers and the native and slave in their dependent states were therefore negative images of the independent worker. Ultimately too, gender played its part the housewife in the industrial era was transferred from 'partner to parasite'. The family wage required her dependence, as it was predicated upon the (white) economically dependent woman at home.

Fraser thus identifies several registers of dependency – socio-legal, political and economic.

### About Me



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I lecture in land law at James Cook University and I write and think about the nature of

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She argues that those 'who wanted full membership in society would have to distinguish themselves from paupers, natives, slaves and housewives to construct their independence.'

Now that socio-legal and political dependency have been formally abolished, the 'register' of dependency that remains is a moral and psychological one. This view attributes dependency to a failure to conform to a particular concept of the universal social subject. This is the ideological stance implicit in the government's 'lifters not leaners'.

### The worker is the universal social subject

The (paid) worker is seen as the universal social subject. In a capitalist society, all are expected to work and to be self-supporting. Any adult who is not a worker 'bears the heavier burden of self-justification.' Fraser argues however that this still carries a gender and a race subtext because it assumes access to a decent job and that the worker is not a primary parent. I would add also that it assumes a class (socio-economic) subtext, but here, I will focus on its gendered nature.

In terms of welfare, the role (largely of women) as primary carers is included in the sphere of 'leaners' or of those who get 'something for nothing'. In other words, caring work is of no value and should not be financially recompensed. This is confirmed when we look at the wage gap between those in the paid workforce who undertake care work. Childcare workers and aged care workers enjoy a particularly low rate of pay relative to equivalent work. The [Coalition in one of its earliest decisions](#) in office has [frozen any pay increases](#) negotiated under the previous government, affirming the government's position on the value of this work.

The criticisms of paid parental leave buy into this discourse that privileges paid work and renders unpaid caring work of no value. '[Paying rich women to stay at home](#)' fails to [examine the structural issues](#) associated with women being fully engaged in the workforce, which extend also to adequate affordable childcare. It also misses the point of valuing child care and the regular unpaid duties of home maintenance. Transforming the [single parent benefit to unemployment benefit](#) likewise positions those with the primary care of children (usually women) as the unencumbered decontextualised worker. To the extent that such a person can only take employment that does not interfere with their primary care responsibilities, they and of course their own dependents, are left without sufficient income.

Work - by which politicians and commentators mean paid work - may well be an important aspect of our social identity, but the argument of feminists is that paid work does not occur without unpaid work. Unpaid work is largely carried out by women. To characterise those who engage in unpaid work as 'leaners' misses the point of the structural disadvantage of women and fails to seek to remedy this.

These structural questions will not be helped by marginalising those who receive welfare support. Instead, the basis of distributive justice in our system needs recalibration. For example childcare tends to be positioned as a domestic issue rather than an economic need. This will keep primary carers of young children marginalised in the context of paid work. Reframing this issue would provide structural solutions that addressed the real needs of society and its paid workers.

So long as we ignore the fact of economic and governmental division of the world of paid work and the unpaid work of 'home', the marginalisation of 'dependency' on the welfare state will remain gendered.

As Fraser points out:

When interdependence is the norm, only then will we make a dent in poverty.

Surely it is the task of government to set the policy bar high enough to include all citizens, not to frame its policy in a way that generates popular perception of undeserving 'leaners' who become, through such policy, economically and socially marginalised.

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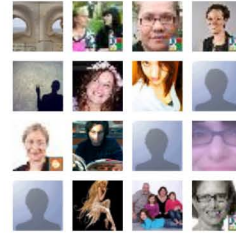
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