

**The Social Contract Revisited**

# Gendered Aspects of Activation Policies: The Limits of Welfare to Work

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## Executive Summary

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- The pursuit of labour market activation policy, particularly in the United Kingdom through the government's welfare reform programme, is insufficiently attentive to issues of gender and to the closely related and complex nexus of gender, work, and care. As a consequence, activation policy is contributing to a growing 'care deficit'.
- The impact of a care deficit is disproportionately borne by women. Unless care issues are directly confronted in the context of welfare reform, the government's welfare-to-work policies are likely to impede progress towards gender equality rather than advance it.
- For the same reasons, the failure to attend to the gendered social consequences of labour activation jeopardizes the government's social justice goals of combating child poverty and promoting social inclusion.
- The deployment of gender as an explicit category of analysis is a useful evaluative and critical tool in a policymaking context.

# Gendered Aspects of Activation Policies: the Limits of Welfare to Work

## *Introduction*

The current UK government has invested heavily in labour market activation, both as an economic and social strategy. Over the last eighteen months alone it has published four lengthy consultation papers on welfare reform. This has resulted in the phased introduction of significant changes to welfare provision, operating alongside other activation-based initiatives, including a high-profile skills agenda, a national childcare strategy, and 'family-friendly' employment policies to smooth the path to paid work for those with family responsibilities. Even policies that are not primarily promoted in terms of activation but are rather advanced as egalitarian or social justice initiatives, such as anti-discrimination and equal pay policies, are nevertheless closely allied to the pursuit of activation. These diverse policy strands come together in a political commitment to social inclusion, a normative frame which, under 'New Labour', has eclipsed concerns about economic redistribution (Collins 2003).

This policy brief argues that the pursuit of activation policies, particularly in the United Kingdom, is insufficiently attentive to issues of gender and to the closely related and complex nexus of gender, work, and care. The brief takes as its focus the UK government's welfare reform programme, concentrating on those aspects in which gender considerations are, or should be, of most significance. By so doing, it also seeks to contribute to the wider debate about the desirability and effectiveness of welfare-to-work policies.

## *Why pay attention to gender?*

Gender is a critical feature of most social orderings, particularly the social organization of work. It has long been recognized that the form that work has taken in

most industrialized societies has been premised on a gendered division of labour. This has facilitated men's participation in paid work unencumbered by care obligations, while women have assumed primary responsibility for caregiving, thus limiting their ability to participate in paid employment. It is also widely acknowledged that, as the twentieth century advanced, this 'gender order', upon which not just work but also welfare was based, underwent significant transformation as women with caring responsibilities (re)entered paid work in increasing numbers to meet a growing economic demand for flexible employment (Conaghan and Rittich 2005).

This virtual recasting of gender relations is the unarticulated backdrop to current employment policy and welfare reform, signalling a need to be attentive to gender and to the gendered configurations that any reform programme is likely to produce. A failure to attend to gender poses a number of specific risks. First, insofar as welfare reform is premised on social justice goals, such as combating child poverty and promoting social inclusion, there is a real risk that these will be jeopardized by a neglect of gender issues. Secondly, and relatedly, the costs and benefits of welfare reform are likely to have a disparate, gender-based impact that impedes progress towards gender equality. Thirdly, a failure to attend closely to the gender-work-care nexus risks exacerbating what is already identified as a global 'care deficit', whereby growing care needs are being insufficiently met by diminishing care provision (UNDP 1999: 77).

## *An overview of welfare-to-work in the UK*

Welfare-to-work has been a developing aspect of UK welfare reform since the 1990s (Paz-Fuchs 2008), most typified to date by the introduction of 'New

Deal' arrangements; that is, tailored back-to-work support programmes targeting particular groups of benefit claimants, such as lone parents or young people. Although these programmes are characterized by a 'carrot and stick' approach to welfare, this has been within the context of a relatively gentle sanctions regime. By contrast, more recent interventions are becoming much tougher in tone and substance (see e.g., DWP 2008a: Chapter 2) and the focus is shifting beyond particular groups towards the articulation of a general expectation, progressing to an obligation, on everyone who is able, to engage in paid work. Accompanying this is a movement away from differentiated benefits for different categories of claimant towards the realization of a single working age benefit regime (DWP 2008b: Chapter 2). This is requiring a complete overhaul of the benefits system, which the government seeks to accomplish in stages.<sup>1</sup>

Although aiming to streamline benefits, the government also wants maximum flexibility in the delivery of job support services. The idea is to develop tailored provision which responds to the diverse needs of individual jobseekers, an approach characterized in the latest Government White Paper as 'personalized conditionality and support' (DWP 2008b: Chapter 4). The concrete implications of this approach include:

- (i) the imposition of an obligation to work, or to get ready for work, on categories of benefit claimant hitherto not required to seek paid employment (for example, lone parents of young children, the long-term sick, and disabled people);
- (ii) the promotion of a 'market in employment services' to facilitate the implementation of welfare-to-work policies, encompassing the public, private, and voluntary sectors (described by some commentators as the 'privatization' of the welfare system); and
- (iii) the application of a regulatory regime on

individual claimants which is progressively more interventionist and coercive.<sup>2</sup>

These reforms, the implementation of which is already well underway, have attracted both approbation and criticism. Many commentators view reform as a long overdue response to a perceived culture of welfare dependency (e.g., Kay 2008). By contrast, others, particularly anti-poverty activists, are concerned about the coercive aspects of reform and the practical and humanitarian implications of threats to withdraw benefit from people already struggling to survive on very limited means (see, e.g., CPAG 2008; Liberty 2009). These concerns are not likely to recede as the recession deepens, although the government considers recent and anticipated job losses not as a reason for delaying welfare reform but rather as a ground for proceeding with even greater vigour and expedition (DWP 2008b: 5).

### *Implications of gender issues for welfare*

What happens when we look at welfare reform through a gender lens? How does this advance our understanding of such complex and contentious terrain? Taking gender as a key category of analysis and critique brings to the fore particular aspects of the welfare debate, specifically:

- (i) the complex nexus of gender, work, and care;
- (ii) the impact of welfare reform on gender equality objectives; and
- (iii) the role of welfare-to-work policies in promoting – or impeding – the pursuit of social justice.

### *The work-gender-care nexus*

Welfare reform aims to increase participation in paid work. However, where such participation has long been skewed in gendered ways, the expectation that

1. See, for example, the abolition of incapacity benefit in late 2008 in favour of a new 'Employment and Support Allowance' (ESA).

2. So much so as to attract the critical attention of human rights groups such as Liberty: see e.g. their recent briefing (Liberty 2009) relating to provisions in the Welfare Reform Bill requiring jobseekers to answer questions about their drug and alcohol use.

everyone should work cannot fail to disrupt other gendered social arrangements, including those governing the provision of care in families and communities. The potential impact of welfare-to-work policies on unpaid care arrangements assumes a new significance when we examine them in relation to the gender-biased environment. Moreover, when we consider activation policies alongside other factors affecting the demand for and provision of care, such as longer life expectancy and reductions in social (state-based) care provision, what emerges is a rapidly expanding care deficit, placing both formal (state or market provided) care services and informal (family-based) care arrangements under severe stress.

Welfare-to-work policies demonstrate insufficient awareness of the seriousness of care concerns. It is true that care issues are visible in the policy debate. The government acknowledges, for example, that parents, particularly lone parents, need more support in finding and funding childcare if they are to engage in paid employment (DWP 2007: Chapter 2). Moreover, there is clearly a willingness to relax the rigours of a paid work obligation on those who provide significant care to an adult or disabled family member (DWP 2008b). However, such concessions notwithstanding, care is largely situated at the periphery rather than the centre of welfare policy. At no stage is there direct engagement with the implications of welfare-to-work for the care economy.<sup>3</sup>

This is partly a result of the assumptions about care and carers that tend to inform policy discourse. Not only is care positioned as tangential to, rather than an integral dimension of, welfare, but carers are constructed as a discrete minority group. The perception is that care is an exception to an assumed norm that most people neither need nor provide care. In reality, however, care is universal: everyone requires care at some point in their life

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3. By 'the care economy' I mean the range of social arrangements which together operate to provide care when and where it is needed.

and many of us are called upon to deliver it. Moreover, care operates across a 'spectrum of need intensities', mediated by time and circumstance, making a clear distinction between 'workers' and 'carers' unhelpful for policy purposes and, arguably, unsustainable (Moullin 2007).<sup>4</sup> Care is a *sine qua non* of social organization and, where there is a genuine political commitment to human flourishing, care must be right at the forefront of policy development. In the context of activation initiatives, this means engaging much more directly and extensively with the needs of, and impact on, the care economy than currently occurs.

There is another problematic dimension to the construction of care in welfare-to-work policies. By emphasizing the economic importance of paid work and the responsibility of virtually all citizens to engage in it, the unavoidable implication is that unpaid care work is without productive value. Of course, this is quite wrong. Leaving aside the huge social value which care confers, unpaid care work undoubtedly contributes value measurable in economic terms. A recent study carried out by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) estimated that the economic value of unpaid care work in England alone is equivalent to £67 billion in substitute formal (i.e., paid) services (ibid.). Moreover, this excludes childcare which, while popularly regarded as a 'labour of love' is nevertheless labour, and productive labour too: childcare is easily commodifiable when delivered outside a family context. Childcare also plays an essential role in reproducing tomorrow's labour force, thereby contributing to the long-term sustainability of our pensions and investments.

Because care work has been traditionally done by women outside the 'public' sphere of state and market, its economic value has tended to be overlooked. Care is at once ubiquitous and invisible:

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4. Similarly problematic is the tendency within the policy literature to view 'parents' as distinct from 'carers', implying that parents do not engage in caring work.

on the one hand, a fundamental aspect of human functioning; on the other, a barely discernible aspect of mainstream social and political discourse. It is only when the state is required to confront the cost of having to provide care outside a family context, as increasingly occurs when women's availability as unpaid carers becomes constrained by their paid work obligations, that the real costs of care become apparent. If activation goals are to cohere with a legitimate policy concern to ensure adequate care where it is needed, welfare-to-work policies must fully confront the economic dimensions to care provision.

### *Welfare reform and gender equality*

It has been argued so far that the UK government's welfare-to-work programme fails to pay sufficient attention to the nexus of gender, work, and care, thereby contributing to growing pressure on the care economy. However, an additional risk accompanies this neglect: that welfare reform will impede rather than advance gender equality goals.

Work has long been a site of gender struggle. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, Engels argued that employment participation was crucial to women's emancipation (Engels 1970). However, women's increased employment participation does not necessarily produce gender equality if the terms upon which women and men have access to and engage in work are not the same. As things stand, the world of work still remains largely predicated on an understanding of workers as unencumbered by caring responsibilities which preclude or limit their availability for employment.

Within such a frame, care responsibilities are viewed as voluntarily assumed rather than as structurally determined. Similarly, women workers' childcare needs are understood to be derived from individual life choices rather than as the product of a particular social ordering. Moreover, this notion of the 'unencumbered self' sustains not just understandings of work, but also of citizenship (Berns 2002). Inevitably therefore, it infuses welfare policy much more broadly. The concept of 'personalized conditionality', for example, is a thoroughly individualized conception of personal responsibility.

It struggles to recognize responsibility in relational contexts. The idea that we are connected to others and make decisions informed by a concern for them, rather than, for example, on the basis of purely self-interested, economic considerations does not sit easily alongside the 'rational economic actor' that welfare policy generally presumes (Barlow and Duncan 2000).

The assumption that workers are unencumbered combines with the privileging of a paid work paradigm to place women at a pronounced disadvantage with regard to the impact of welfare-to-work policies. The government's response is to tackle labour market structures and practices that inhibit women's employment, thereby hoping to produce an impact which is gender-neutral. Hence, the introduction of a raft of family-friendly employment policies to smooth the path to paid work for women with caring responsibilities, including extending the period of paid maternity leave and creating a new right to request flexible working (Conaghan 2003).

Nevertheless, it is questionable whether these measures, either as conceived or operated, really do enough to tackle the problem of women's workplace disadvantage. In the case of extended leave provision, for example, it is arguable that the practical result has been to reinforce responsibility for childcare along gendered lines. Certainly, it does nothing to disrupt gendered social arrangements around care. At the very least, such leave provisions ought to be, as far as is practical, gender-neutral, so that men as well as women have the opportunity to be fully involved with children in their early years.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in relation to flexible working, it must be seriously questioned whether a right merely to request flexible work, backed by little or no sanction, is robust enough to withstand the pressures that employers are likely to face in the current period of economic difficulty.<sup>6</sup>

5. Although the government has introduced both paternity and parental leave arrangements, they are for much shorter periods than maternity leave and, in the case of parental leave, without any paid element.

6. Early evidence shows that the recession is already impacting heavily on women workers, with women apparently losing their jobs at twice the rate of men, according to a recent newspaper report (Oakeshott 2009).

According to Nancy Fraser (1997), the solution here is to posit a model of work and/or a notion of citizenship premised on a 'universal caregiver'; that is, a policy assumption that all workers/citizens have care responsibilities. Such a model acknowledges the human necessity of care and the reality of relational interdependence. At the same time, it entails a recognition of care needs which does not have the effect of locking women rather than men into caring. Until such a model of universal caregiving forms the basic starting point of welfare-to-work policy, women are likely to remain the default carers, carrying a dual burden of expectation with regard to paid and unpaid work in circumstances where there are little or no policy incentives in place to encourage a more even distribution of unpaid care responsibilities.

### *Welfare reform and social justice*

The government presents its welfare reform programme strongly in social justice terms. Combating child poverty and promoting social inclusion are constantly invoked to justify and promote welfare-to-work policies. Welfare reform is also defended in terms of human flourishing: work, it is argued, is good for you, conferring a range of physical, emotional, social, and economic benefits which, amongst other things, promote opportunity and help realize potential (DWP 2008a: Chapter 1). An obligation to work, therefore, is a positive measure which frees people from dependency, enabling and empowering them.

Many commentators argue that the reality of welfare-to-work is very different: that far from enabling and empowering, it debilitates and coerces; that rather than promoting social inclusion, it excludes and stigmatizes the most vulnerable; that far from combating child poverty, it risks condemning children to a life of economic and emotional impoverishment.

Applying a gender lens does little to lighten the bleakness of such a pessimistic assessment. Highlighting the likely effects of welfare-to-work on women brings into focus the precariousness which often characterizes the kind of work women do.

Working for long hours for low pay and in poor and insecure conditions cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be viewed as 'good for you' (CentreLGS 2008). Yet the likelihood is that an increased obligation to work backed by a threat to withdraw benefits will coerce many more women into conditions of precariousness, particularly in a context of economic instability.

A gender perspective also renders problematic the current policy emphasis on 'lone parents'. It is striking that notwithstanding the high proportion of single parents who are women (around 90%), this extreme gender imbalance is rarely, if ever, acknowledged in policy debate. There is, without a doubt, significant policy engagement with the plight of lone parents, but the potential implications of managing a pool of welfare claimants which is, in gender terms, highly skewed, are rarely, if ever, addressed. This may account in part for the failure, in the context of imposing an enhanced work obligation, to make any express provision for lone parents who have experienced domestic violence. The lack of a gender 'antenna' in policymaking risks overlooking the range of social (often gendered) factors which produce 'lone' parents, factors which may also constrain the ability of those affected to (re)enter paid employment.

At the same time, official avoidance of any kind of gender discourse in a welfare policy context creates space for the articulation of alternative gendered narratives around welfare which are socially and politically problematic. Thus, for example, the visible targeting of lone *parents* in a welfare-to-work context too easily translates in the public domain into gendered social characterizations of single *mothers* as irresponsible and parasitic. Consider, for example, the recent furore surrounding the case of Karen Matthews, convicted of kidnapping her daughter, Shannon, in relation to which The *Daily Mail* ran the following headline 'DAVID CAMERON: There are five million people on benefits in Britain: how do we stop them turning into Karen Matthews' (8 December 2008). The injection of a moral tone into political endorsements of paid work further



contributes to this process of stigmatization. Yet, it is vital to recognize that the predominance of women as lone parents is not accidental; rather, it is a reflection and expression of entrenched social norms with highly gendered distributional effects. Until the gendered character of lone parenting is fully acknowledged and accommodated in the context of welfare-to-work policies, starting with the recognition that women are welfare recipients in large part because they are women, these distributional effects are likely to remain invisible and therefore operative, to women's continued detriment.

Finally, the focus on child poverty in various policy initiatives would also benefit from greater attention to gender considerations. In practical terms, it is difficult to separate the problem of child poverty from that of women's disadvantage. Because women continue to assume primary responsibility for caring for children (a situation which, policy rhetoric notwithstanding, remains largely unchanged even in the twenty-first century), their economic circumstances must be an integral aspect of child poverty considerations. Combating child poverty and promoting gender equality have to be seen as critically interdependent. Although the government is clearly committed to gender equality as a policy goal, it is curiously reluctant to probe the implications of gender inequality in a welfare reform context. 'Parenting' and 'family' are the policy frames, but women's personal lives are the material context. Recognizing this gender dimension can only enhance the effectiveness of policies aimed at combating child poverty. Ignoring it risks condemning both women and children to lives of disadvantage and impoverishment.

### Conclusions

The political theorist, Iris Marion Young (1990), has identified five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Young expounds this conceptual frame for oppression as a counter to what she views as a preoccupation in social and political theory with distributive considerations. Her theoretical position presages a shift in progressive political thinking away

from economic distribution as the focus of social justice towards a concern with issues of recognition (Fraser 1997). In the same way, modern welfare reform programmes are no longer primarily concerned with promoting a more equal distribution of economic and social goods. Instead they seek to ensure that the opportunity to access such goods is more or less equal and, most particularly, that social barriers to access are removed. This is the essence of the idea of social inclusion that underpins labour activation.

My argument is not with the notion of social inclusion itself (although that is undoubtedly the subject of contestation; see Collins [2003]), but rather with the means deployed to realize it in a welfare-to-work context. Returning to Young's 'five faces', what has to be asked is whether New Labour's pursuit of social inclusion is inadvertently producing a highly oppressive regulatory regime. Applying once again a gender lens, Young's faces of oppression become visible: in the exploitation that characterizes the kind of precarious work which many women find is their only practical option in a paid labour context; in the marginalization that their social position as lone mothers seeking benefits confers; and in the powerlessness that is the reality of a 'social contract' in which government prescribes the conditions for material survival. One can argue of course that these considerations extend beyond the situation of women on welfare; indeed that they are generally applicable to welfare-to-work regimes. I confine myself here to suggesting that policymaking would clearly benefit from the more focused application of gender as a category of analysis and critique, and illustrating this contention by casting a gender lens on debates around welfare reform.

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