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Political discourse and gendered welfare reform: a case study of the UK Coalition government

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Political discourse and gendered welfare reform: a case study of the UK Coalition government

In the UK, as in many other countries, welfare reform in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis has had a detrimental effect on gender equality. Between 2010 and 2015 the UK Coalition government initiated far-reaching cuts to public spending, as well as an increase in welfare conditionality. These reforms have hit women harder than men as they are more likely to rely on welfare benefits and services due to unpaid care responsibilities. Many have suggested that the way in which issues are represented by policymakers can limit what can be conceived as appropriate policy solutions. In line with this, Bacchi's *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach is used in this article to interrogate the way in which welfare was problematised by the UK Coalition government. Findings suggest that the Coalition's represented reform as necessary to make work pay, with 'work' promoted as paid work and unpaid care work (predominantly undertaken by women) ignored. It also highlights the ways in which the Coalition's promotion of paid work silenced the necessity and value of care, allowing for the implementation of welfare reforms which have disproportionately disadvantaged women and exacerbated gender inequality.

Key words: Welfare, welfare reform, discourse, gender, women, Coalition government

Introduction

In Europe and elsewhere, the period since 2008 has been characterised by acceleration in the transformation of welfare states, with public spending cuts and welfare services and benefits scaled back. In many cases this has had detrimental consequences for gender equality (Annesley and Scheele, 2011, Karamessini and Rubery, 2014) with women hit hardest due to their greater propensity to be reliant on welfare.

In the UK the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government came to power in 2010 promising public spending cuts to reduce the fiscal deficit. Their proposals

for welfare reform were first outlined in their consultation document *21st Century Welfare* (DWP, 2010), published shortly after the election. These proposals were criticised by civil society campaigning and analysis organisations for focusing on a supposed lack of personal responsibility among the poor as the root cause of welfare reliance, and making little or no reference to the barriers to greater economic autonomy that face many women (e.g. Engender, 2015, Oxfam, 2010). Despite warnings that these proposals would likely disproportionately harm women, the Welfare Reform Act of 2012 included a raft of changes to benefits and tax credits which have indeed hit women hardest. Further reforms since then have compounded this, while tax cuts during the same period have advantaged men (WBG, 2018, WBG, 2019b).

The direction of these reforms, and the discourses that underpin them, can be traced back to New Labour and their ‘welfare to work’ agenda (Levitas, 1998, Lister, 1998, Newman, 2001), as well as to the Conservative party’s promotion of individualism during the 1980s and 1990s (Clarke and Newman, 1997). However, the Coalition is recognised to have implemented some of the most far-reaching cuts to benefits and tax credits in recent times (Bochel and Powell, 2016), exacerbating the growing conflict between women’s role as paid workers and carers. Over the past four decades there has been a shift, in the UK and elsewhere, away from the male breadwinner model of welfare (instituted in the welfare states of the post-war era) towards the adult worker model, with women increasingly expected to enter the labour market on the same basis as men. However, this has not been accompanied by changes in gender norms relating to care, nor the investment in social and childcare necessary to address the barrier posed by unpaid care commitments to many women’s participation, or increased participation, in the

labour market (Lewis, 2009, Pascall, 2012). Furthermore, with increasing numbers of children born outside of marriage and rising divorce rates, more women than ever are needing to fulfil the role of both paid worker and primary carer as lone parents. Indeed, the main driver for the disproportionate impact of recent welfare reforms on women in the UK has been the impact on lone parent households, which have lost more of their income than any other household type (EHRC, 2018, 19).

Existing literature relating to recent welfare reforms in the UK has largely focused on how these have been justified (Patrick, 2012, Slater, 2014, Wiggan, 2012) or the extent to which their policies have disproportionately impacted upon women (Annesley, 2014, Campbell and Childs, 2015, Sanders et al., 2019). This article seeks to bridge a gap between these two schools of literature by analysing the way in which the Coalition problematised welfare during its time in office, and how this may have led to the implementation of reforms that disproportionately disadvantaged women. It utilises Carol Bacchi's (1999, 2009) *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach to analyse the Coalition's early policy document *21st Century Welfare* (DWP, 2010) and 82 speeches given by four prominent Coalition politicians between 2010 and 2015. In applying this approach it: 1) identifies the way in which the Coalition government represented the need for welfare reform; 2) explores the assumptions and gendered silences underpinning the identified problematisation; and 3) discusses the gendered effects leading from this problematisation and the wider implications for gender equality.

The findings suggest that in their early policy document *21st Century Welfare* (DWP, 2010) the Coalition government represented its reforms as necessary to 'make work pay' and establish a fairer relationship between benefit recipients and taxpayers. It

went on, in the welfare speeches of its key politicians, to define ‘work’ as paid work and promote this as good for the individual, family and society, while ignoring the necessity and value of care. It also promoted the assumption that participation in paid work qualifies individuals for protection through policy, again ignoring care in this regard. Lastly, this study finds that the Coalition’s discourse failed to recognise care as a potential barrier to participation in paid work. In light of these findings, this article argues that the Coalition’s discourse perpetuated the hegemonic silence around the necessity and value of care, reinforcing the assumption that welfare policy and its impacts are gender neutral and obscuring the ways in which their reforms would disadvantage women. This, it is argued, allowed for welfare reforms to be implemented which have exacerbated gender inequality in the UK.

Political discourse, silences and gendered welfare reform

Theories of the policy making process highlight the importance of politicians in setting the agenda for policy change (Kingdon, 1995, Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Similarly, social constructionist scholarship, such as frame analysis, problem definition literature and causal story literature, highlights the role of discourse or framing in determining our understanding of certain issues (Bacchi, 2009, Goffman, 1974, Rochefort and Cobb, 1994). In particular, this literature suggests that political discourse can help to determine which social issues come to be seen as policy problems, as well as which policies gain acceptance as solutions to these problems and which social groups are allocated any burdens as a result of policy change (Ingram et al., 2007, Schneider and Ingram, 2005, Stone, 1989).

Indeed, in seeking to understand why we get gendered policy outcomes, feminist scholars have pointed to the need to look at the framing of policy change (e.g. Meier et al., 2009), and in particular how ‘silences’ in political discourse may serve to obscure the ways in which policies may disadvantage women and reinforce gender inequality (Bakker, 1994, Young et al., 2011). In the 1980s Nancy Fraser was arguing for a focus on the way in which discourses (and their gendered silences) were functioning in determining the direction of welfare change in the US (1987, 1989). Similarly, many feminists have examined the discourse used to defend extensive welfare reform in the US in the 1990s, in particular the passing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 which made welfare assistance to single mothers conditional on work and brought considerable hardship to many women (Fraser and Gordon, 1994, Hancock, 2004, Mink, 1998, Toft, 2010, Sparks, 2003). These scholars have all highlighted the importance of examining apparently neutral discourses around welfare change and how these may function to silence the perspectives of women and deny citizenship status on the basis of caring within the home, thus helping to justify the removal of welfare rights from poor single mothers in order to force them into paid work.

In the UK, as far back as the 1970s and 1980s, feminists were asking questions such as ‘[w]ho cares for the family?’ (Land, 1978) and ‘[w]ho benefits from women’s central role as unpaid carers within the family?’ (Dale and Peggy, 1986, ix), highlighting the silence in welfare discourse and policy in relation to the growing conflict between women’s roles as workers and carers. Since then there has been, in the UK and elsewhere, an effort to ‘gender’ welfare state studies to highlight the ways in which, due to traditional gender roles, women’s relationship to welfare states is often different from

men's (e.g. Bamba, 2004, Hernes, 1987, Lewis, 2002, Orloff, 2009, Sainsbury, 1999).

Again, this work has sought to highlight the hegemonic silence around the value of care and the barrier that care often poses to women participating in paid work on the same basis as men.

This article builds upon the work discussed here by examining the assumptions and gendered silences underpinning the political discourse relating to recent welfare change in the UK context, and how these may have facilitated the implementation of policies which have disproportionately harmed women – an area which is currently under-examined.

Approach and methods

The analysis presented in this article draws on Bacchi's *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach (1999, 2009). Bacchi's work is influenced by Foucault's conception of discourse not only as language, but also as ways of thinking about, understanding and, in turn, constituting issues. For both, discourses shape what it is possible to think and to say in relation to a specific issue in a specific context (Bacchi, 1999, Bacchi, 2009, Foucault, 1991). Because of this discourses have potential policy effects, creating "difficulties (forms of harm) for members of some social groups" more than others by limiting what can be thought about as acceptable policy solutions and determining how resources are distributed among different social groups (Bacchi, 2009, 15).

Bacchi's WPR approach outlines six questions to guide researchers in interrogating problem representations and their effects (2009, 2). These are: 1) What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?; 2) What presuppositions or assumptions

underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?; 3) How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?; 4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation?; 5) What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?; and 6) How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

This article primarily focuses on applying questions 1, 2, 4 and 5 in an analysis of the Coalition government’s welfare discourse. However, through the presentation of analysis of policy documents and political speeches, this article also sheds light on how the ‘problem’ representation highlighted has come about (question 3) and how this has been produced, disseminated and defended (question 6).

When examining problem representations and their effects, Bacchi suggests that we begin by analysing initial proposals for policy change (2009, 3). Therefore, the first stage of the analysis (presented in the next section) was focused on the Coalition’s consultation document *21st Century Welfare* (DWP, 2010). This was published shortly after they took office and is useful as it explicitly outlines the incoming government’s “*Problems with the current system*” (Ibid., 8). Guided by question 1 above, an inductive approach was adopted to identify and code the ‘problems’ with the system as represented in this document. However, in order to examine the assumptions and silences underpinning the Coalition’s representation of the ‘problem’ with welfare (questions 2 and 4), the second stage of the analysis focused on speeches relating to welfare made by four prominent Coalition politicians during their time in office. Included were speeches made by the Prime Minister (David Cameron), the Deputy Prime Minister (Nick Clegg), the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Iain Duncan Smith) and the Chancellor of

the Exchequer (George Osborne). All speeches made by these politicians that included the word *welfare* were collated from the www.gov.uk website. These were then read and only those which referred in some substantial way to welfare policy were retained for analysis. Some of George Osborne's economic statements were not returned and so were sourced from other publicly accessible websites. In total 82 speeches were included in the analysis.¹ Finally, content analysis was conducted to explore how many times certain themes (such as paid work and unpaid care) were referenced in the speeches. The coding and analysis of all sources was conducted in Nvivo.

It is worth noting, that most references to welfare policy related to benefits and/or tax credits. References to other social policies (health, social care etc.) were only coded for analysis (on the rare occasions) when they were referred to as welfare policies. Similarly, references to taxation policy were only included when they occurred in the context of justifying welfare reform (for example raising the personal income tax allowance alongside reducing welfare benefits in order to incentivise paid work).

The Coalition's 'problem' with welfare

The Coalition's consultation document *21st Century Welfare* (DWP, 2010) was published three months after the 2010 election. Chapter 2 of that document, *Problems with the current system*, stated that the "situation" (i.e. the need for reform) "stems from two key underlying problems: work incentives can be poor; and the system is too complex" (Ibid., 8). This document went on to outline seven "principles to guide reform" (Ibid., 18). Only one of these principles addressed the second of these 'problems', suggesting that the government might "automate processes and maximise self service, to reduce the scope

for fraud, error and overpayments”. Meanwhile, three of the seven principles referred to improving work incentives or reducing the number of workless households. These were to:

- “ensure that people can see that the clear rewards from taking all types of work outweigh the risks;
- further incentivise and encourage households and families to move into work and to increase the amount of work they do, by improving the rewards from work at low earnings, and helping them keep more of their earnings as they work harder”; and
- “continue to support those most in need and reduce the numbers of workless households and children in poverty and ensure that interactions with other systems of support for basic needs are considered” (Ibid., 18).

The perceived need to “make work pay” (Ibid., 3), in order to encourage those on benefits or low incomes to enter paid employment or increase their hours, was therefore central to the Coalition’s justification for welfare reform. This was said to be necessary, not just to ensure that people were better off in work than on benefits, but also to “end the culture of worklessness and dependency” that was said to have “done so much harm to individuals, families and whole communities” (Ibid., 1).

A further two principles for reform outlined in this document were to:

- “increase fairness between different groups of benefit recipients and between recipients and the taxpayer”; and

- “promote responsibility and positive behaviour, doing more to reward saving, strengthening the family and, in tandem with improving incentives, reinforcing conditionality” (Ibid., 18).²

The message conveyed here is that the unreformed system was unfairly advantaging those on benefits at the expense of those in paid work. It is portrayed as failing to promote personal responsibility, with a lack of ‘incentives’ and conditionality allowing, or even encouraging, people to live off benefits paid for by the taxpayer. Therefore, the portrayed need to “establish a fairer relationship between the people who receive benefits and the people who pay for them” (Ibid., 6) was used to reinforce the case for welfare reform to tackle “worklessness” and “make work pay”.

Assumptions and gendered silences

Widening the analysis to include the welfare speeches of four prominent Coalition politicians over their time in office, three key assumptions can be identified as underpinning the problematisation above: 1) that ‘work’ is paid work; 2) that paid work is valuable (for individuals, families and society); and 3) that paid work qualifies individuals to protection through policy. Corresponding silences can be identified around care as work, the necessity and value of care, and the fact that care responsibilities are often a constraining factor in women’s participation in paid work.

Underpinning the Coalition’s construction of welfare reform as necessary to tackle ‘worklessness’ and ‘make work pay’ was the assumption that work is paid work and anything else, including care, is non-work. Across the 82 speeches analysed, a total of 1001 pieces of text were coded as relating to welfare. Of these, 565 related to paid work

(56.4% of all coded references). In turn, 241 of these (24.1%) directly referenced paid work as a valuable activity (for example for the well-being of individuals, families and society). In contrast, only 51 of the 1001 references to welfare or welfare reform referred to care in any context (5.1% of all coded references)³ and of these, only two (0.2%) related to care as a valuable activity

Across the 82 speeches, the term “workless” or “worklessness” was used 61 times to refer to disengagement from the labour market or as a synonym for welfare dependency, with those not in paid work characterised as “paid to be idle”⁴ and getting “something for nothing”⁵ – ignoring the possibility of engagement in non-paid work. Wiggan has pointed out that the term ‘worklessness’ has a wider reach than the term ‘unemployment’, noting that if ‘worklessness’ is defined as the problem, then this potentially “expands the purview of state activation and conditionality...to incorporate disabled people and lone parents” (2012, 387). Therefore, based on the assumption that only paid work is work, we see the justification of reforms to “make work pay” (this or related terms were used 94 times across the 82 speeches) even for those groups previously excluded from an expectation to engage in paid work, either on physical grounds (because they were elderly or disabled)⁶ or because they had caring responsibilities that provided a barrier to their doing so.

The assumption that work is paid work, and all other work – including unpaid care – is non-work was reinforced in the Coalition’s welfare discourse through the promotion of paid work as valuable, for individuals, families and society. Paid employment was represented throughout the speeches analysed as having a transformative effect on individuals’ lives and “boosting confidence and self-esteem”

(IDS 19.09.12). On this basis, welfare reforms, including substantial cuts to benefits received by the most vulnerable, were justified on the basis that only by forcing people into the labour market would they experience the advantages work brings.

“Compassion isn’t measured out in benefit cheques - it’s in the chances you give people...the chance to get a job, to get on, to get that sense of achievement that only comes from doing a hard day’s work for a proper day’s pay” (DC 25.06.12)

Paid work was also associated with a life of freedom. Individuals thus engaged were said to have the freedom to “secure a better future for themselves and their families” (IDS 07.04.14). This sense of freedom was associated with independence from the state and with having security and control over one’s future. This picture of freedom and independence was contrasted through the Coalition’s welfare discourse with a life ‘trapped’ or ‘stuck’ on benefits.

This discourse ignores the reality that many in receipt of welfare, including Income Support, Housing Benefit and Working or Child Tax Credits, may also be in paid work. Furthermore, while it is no doubt true that engagement in paid work can have positive benefits, this discourse operates to obscure the satisfaction and self-worth that can be gained through engagement in other types of work (e.g. unpaid domestic work, care work or voluntary community work) – despite evidence to suggest that these too can have a positive effect on individuals’ health and wellbeing (Duncan and Edwards, 1999, Patrick, 2014). This idealisation of the effects of paid work on one’s self-esteem also ignores the fact that, for many, employment does not represent security and dignity, but is characterised by insecurity, poor working conditions and low pay. This type of work is often the reality for many women that are juggling paid work and caring responsibilities.

The OECD have found globally that time spent by women performing unpaid care work was negatively correlated with their labour force participation; positively correlated with the “probability that they will be engaged in part-time or in vulnerable employment”; and positively correlated with gender wage gaps (2014, 6). Indeed, in the UK, Gingerbread, the charity for single parent families, has claimed that 68% of lone parents “enter low-skilled and low paid work” often on insecure contracts (2012, 3).

The primacy of paid work was also reinforced in the Coalition’s welfare speeches through the promotion of it as good for families. A parent in paid work was represented as the *ideal* parent, an “all-important role model” for their children “to look up to, offering hope and self-worth, with aspirations for their own future transformed” (IDS 07.04.14). Time and again, participation in paid work was explicitly linked with being a good parent.

“...work can help people become better parents. And not simply because of the money. But because it can help you become a better role model. It brings fulfilment. It fosters self-confidence. And it introduces parents to other working parents; people to learn from and talk to” (NC 17.01.11)

The benefits of paid work for the family are reiterated through the Coalition’s discourse relating to ‘workless’ households. Across the speeches analysed there were 25 references to “working families” or “hardworking families”. These are awarded a high moral status, attracting maximum protection through policy. The moral elevation of these families was juxtaposed with the moral denigration of “workless households”; in contrast to the former where hope and self-worth are said to flourish, the latter are places where children “simply don’t know what it is to aspire to work” and where the “cycle of dependency repeats itself across the generations” (IDS 03.11.10).

This discourse fails to acknowledge the established benefits of children receiving one-to-one care (Brooks–Gunn et al., 2002, Waldfogel, 2006) and the fact that parents that are not in paid work can and do provide excellent role models for their children. This lack of recognition of parenting as work, and as valuable and worthwhile, fits with what Daly has identified as a trend away from the idealisation of motherhood through policy (2011). This discourse also fails to acknowledge that the majority of ‘workless’ households are lone parent households, in which the ‘worklessness’ of the parent may be explained by their difficulty in finding and sustaining paid work around caring responsibilities, rather than due to a lack of effort or aspiration. In 2012, only 4.9% of couple households with dependent children were ‘workless’, compared to 37% of lone parent households – reflecting “the ability for couple households to share childcare responsibilities” (ONS, 2012).

Furthermore, the importance of paid work was reinforced in the speeches through the promotion of this as the way in which individuals contribute to society. Those not engaged in paid work were said to be cut adrift from the rest of society, while participation in paid work was portrayed as synonymous with playing a full and useful role in it; therefore, reform was justified on the grounds of helping these people reintegrate and make a contribution.

“...if someone is able to work we should support them in playing a full role in society” (IDS 22.09.10)

“If we are serious about helping people find a foothold in society, we must do all we can to support them into work” (IDS 19.09.12)

This discourse ignores the value of unpaid labour and its economic importance, including to the functioning of the labour market. Data shows that unpaid work accounts for one-third of all valuable economic activity in the OECD member countries – including the UK (Miranda, 2011) while ONS data from 2014 put the value of unpaid work at the equivalent of 56% of GDP (ONS, 2016b). The OECD concludes that unpaid work is an important aspect of economic activity, as well as being an “indispensable factor contributing to the well-being of individuals, their families and societies” (2014, 1).

Alongside ignoring the value of unpaid work and promoting the value of paid work, the Coalition’s welfare discourse also promoted the assumption that participation in paid work earns individuals the right to protection through policy. Across the speeches analysed there were 87 references associating engagement in paid work and an individual or family qualifying for protection through policy. Those who engage in paid work were said to be “doing the right thing” and “playing by the rules”⁶ and promised a government on their side. On the other hand, those ‘out-of-work’ were threatened with welfare cuts and greater conditionality – expected to mimic paid work in order to qualify for welfare assistance. Sanctions for those not complying or turning down ‘reasonable’ job offers were also justified on the grounds of reinforcing the duty to engage in paid work.

“Those who can work but are unemployed will be expected to engage with us, treating their search for work as a full-time job” (IDS 25.10.12)

“...we are developing sanctions for those who refuse to play by the rules, as well as targeted work activity for those who need to get used to the habits of work” (IDS 11.11.10)

In contrast to the 87 references to engagement in paid employment qualifying an individual to protection through policy, only three references associated caring with the right to such protection.⁷ The discrepancy here highlights how far discourse around the role of the welfare state had evolved by this time; the system was no longer presented as a safety net to support those unable to engage in paid work, including women (or men) undertaking “vital work”, including care, within the home (Beveridge quoted in Pascall, 2012, 8). Instead, the system was promoted almost exclusively by the Coalition as a tool to reward paid work and punish those out of paid work.

“Today the government is announcing the most radical overhaul of our welfare system since its inception, driven by a single, overriding principle: the purpose of welfare is to help people into work” (NC 11.11.10)

“...we need a welfare system where if you can work, you should work, and if you don't work, you don't get benefits” (DC 30.07.14)

In light of this recasting of the welfare state as a tool for promoting paid work, we might expect acknowledgement of the potential barrier posed by unpaid care responsibilities to many women's engagement with paid work. There were only 10 such references across the 82 speeches (representing just 1% of all coded references). Four of these 10 references came from one speech by Nick Clegg in 2012 in which he recognised the societal expectations and the financial factors that often impair women's labour market attachment. One reference from this speech was:

“Even when the children are grown up, working full time isn't possible for many women. With the population living longer...women who spend their thirties raising young children and their fifties caring for elderly parents. And for single mothers it

can be even harder. They have a greater need to go to work, but much less help at home” (NC 13.11.12)

A further three of the 10 references related to help with childcare provided through Universal Credit and tax-free childcare, and one related to carers being excluded from a drive for full employment. Two of the references, however, used additional investment in childcare as justification for stricter conditionality for lone parents who are ‘out-of-work’.

“Thanks to this government, lone parents out of work can now get free childcare for their three and four year olds. So it is reasonable to ask that they start regularly attending jobcentres and preparing to return to work” (GO 26.06.13)

“we also need to ask if single parents living on benefits can do more to prepare for work...now there is free childcare for all children from age three, that does prompt a question about how some of that time – 15 hours a week...– should be used by parents on Income Support...even if there’s no scope for actually working, there should at least be for preparing to work: getting down to the job centre; writing a CV; learning new skills” (DC 25.06.12)

This discourse minimises consideration of care, or associated domestic work, as a potential barrier to labour market engagement, reinforcing the other silences discussed above relating to the necessity and value of care. These silences, in turn, reinforce the assumptions explored above relating to the primacy of paid work, its value, and the importance of participation in paid work, or preparation for this, in qualifying for welfare assistance. Ultimately this discourse obscures the ways in which welfare reforms aimed at “making work pay” interact with existing inequalities in the distribution of unpaid care

between women and men, allowing for policies which harm women and gender inequality.

Gendered effects

Question 5 of the WPR approach asks us to consider the effects (including discursive, subjectification and lived effects) of the way a problem is represented (Bacchi, 2009, 15).

Discursive effects relate to the limits placed upon what can be thought or said about an issue as a result of the way in which it is problematised – including what policy interventions may be considered appropriate. The Coalition’s problematisation of welfare limits consideration of non-paid work, including care, as valuable or as a potential barrier to paid work – and therefore limits consideration of the role the state could or should play in supporting care. Thus, despite the UK having some of the highest net childcare costs in the world (OECD, 2019), investment in early years education, Sure Start and the childcare element of Working Tax Credit fell 21% between 2009-10 and 2012-13, while Child Tax Credits and Child Benefit payments were frozen (Lupton, 2015, 21).

Inadequate Early Years funding has meant that the sector has lacked the capacity to deliver the 15 hours of pre-school care for ‘working’ parents promised by the Coalition and extended to 30 hours in 2017 (Preschool Learning Alliance, 2017). Where the capacity exists, this only covers 38 weeks of the year. Meanwhile there was a 7% cut to adult social care in the same period despite a growing elderly population (Lupton, 2015, 21).

The Coalition’s problematisation also precluded consideration of how unpaid care may be more equally distributed between women and men. Thus, in 2015 women still did an average of 60% more unpaid work than men (ONS, 2016b) and still provided 74% of

the total childcare time (ONS, 2016a). It also limited consideration of how care and paid work commitments may be managed by lone parents, arguably allowing for the continued erosion of Income Support. Until 2008 lone parents could receive this until their youngest child turned 16. Between 2008 and 2010 this was incrementally reduced to seven. Under Universal Credit parents of three and four year olds are required to seek and be available for work, those with two year olds are required to attend work focused interviews, and those with one year olds are required to undertake work preparation activities or face losing some or all of their benefits. Meanwhile, the Coalition presided over a sharp increase in Job Seeker's Allowance sanctions applied to vulnerable groups, including lone parents (JRF, 2014); in 2015-16, one in five lone parents were referred for sanctions (Gingerbread, 2017, 11).

Moving on, we can consider the subjectification effects of the Coalition's problematisation of welfare – those relating to the subject positions assigned through policies and discourses. If the 'problem' with welfare is represented to be that it encourages or supports 'worklessness', then those receiving welfare benefits (the 'workless') are also, by extension, defined as part of the problem. This allows welfare cuts to be framed as necessary to punish this problem behaviour and get them into paid work, establishing a paternal or authoritarian relationship between the state and those on welfare. The Coalition also framed reform as necessary to “establish a fairer relationship between the people who receive benefits and the people who pay for them” (DWP, 2010 6). Bacchi borrows Foucault's term “dividing-practice” to describe this pitting of different societal groups against one another (2009, 16). Here welfare is represented to be a gift from the taxpayer to the welfare recipient (Wiggan, 2010), with cuts justifiable in

the name of protecting the interests of the taxpayer, or to punish or change the negative behaviour of the deviant target group. Given that more women than men receive benefits and head up ‘workless’ households as lone parents, and more men than women are taxpayers (IFS, 2014), we can see how this discourse reinforces existing unequal gender relations.

Moreover, with paid work promoted as fulfilling, as making you a better parent and as the primary way you can contribute to society, those who are engaged in care work may be considered by others not to be leading a fulfilling life, not to be good parents and not to be contributing to society. British Social Attitudes data shows that since 1998 benefits for single parents have consistently been a relatively unpopular area for more government spending, second only to spending on benefits for unemployed people – and that support for more spending on these was lower during the Coalition’s time in office than at any other time (Curtice et al., 2016, 27). Furthermore, research has found that female welfare recipients themselves often internalise, reproduce and disassociate from negative social constructions of women on welfare (Hamilton, 2012, Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013, Skeggs, 2005). These effects are likely to undermine resistance to the damaging discourses explored above and to the implementation of welfare policies that punish women more than men.

Lastly, we can consider the lived effects of the Coalition’s problematisation of welfare. Women have been hit over 13 times as hard as men by tax and welfare changes since 2010 – losing on average £400 per year, compared to £30 for men (EHRC, 2018, 99). Lone parents, 90% of which are women (ONS, 2015), have been hit hardest, losing ‘almost one-fifth of their total net income’ (Ibid., 19). While tax cuts, which will have

cost the Treasury £47bn per year by 2021-22 (WBG, 2019b) have benefitted men (HM Revenue & Customs, 2018, WBG, 2017), the £38.6bn per year saved through cuts to social security in the same period has largely come from women's income (WBG, 2019b). The Benefit Cap, the freeze on 'out of work' benefits and tax credits, changes and freezes to Child Benefit, and the transition to Universal Credit, have all had, and continue to have, a significantly greater detrimental impact upon women than men (WBG, 2019b). The two-child limit in relation to Child Tax Credits and Universal Credit has hit BAME women hardest as they tend to have larger families (Ibid) and lone parents are the least likely to be able to compensate for the impact of this policy on their family (Child Poverty Action Group et al., 2019). Cuts, in particular to Housing Benefit, have fuelled a rise in homelessness among families headed by single mothers; this group make up two thirds of statutory homeless families with children, despite making up only one quarter of all families with dependent children (WBG, 2019a, 4). Meanwhile, increased conditionality and the imposition of sanctions, or the threat of these, is causing extreme distress and hardship. Again, lone parents are most affected as they struggle to juggle job seeking requirements with unpaid care responsibilities, alongside the downgrading of lone parent 'flexibilities' and the removal of the legal obligation for service providers to take account of their childcare responsibilities. Evidence suggests that these changes have led to lone parents resorting to 'using food banks, applying for hardship payments, borrowing money (from family, friends or doorstep lenders), restricting heating and lighting in their home, and/or restricting their food intake' in order to cope (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp, 2018, 5).

Conclusion

This article has analysed the way in which the UK Coalition government's problematisation of welfare during their time in office may have led to the implementation of reforms that have disproportionately disadvantaged women and harmed gender equality. It has shown that the Coalition constructed reform as necessary to "make work pay", with work defined almost exclusively as paid work and unpaid care work ignored. It has also shown that paid work was promoted as valuable and as qualifying individuals for protection through policy. Meanwhile, unpaid care work was comparatively ignored in these respects, as well as being ignored as a potential barrier to participation in paid work. This article argues that this problematisation, and the assumptions and silences underpinning it, functioned to obscure the ways in which welfare policy interacts with existing gender relations, in particular the unequal distribution of unpaid care between women and men. It argues that this led to a devaluing of care in discourse and policy, a devaluing of those who care and, ultimately, increased hardship for women on welfare, and often their children.

With austerity measures hitting women hardest in the UK, as well as elsewhere in Europe (e.g. Addabbo et al., 2018, Bettio et al., 2013, Villa, 2015), this article highlights the need to move beyond explaining why, or to what extent this is the case – towards examining how this is possible. If political welfare discourses are harming women – either through the lived effects of the policies these discourses justify, or through the way in which these encourage us to devalue unpaid care work and those in society most likely to do this work – then only by exposing and contesting these discourses can we hope to

displace these and open up the possibility of more gender neutral welfare policies and outcomes in the future.

Notes

- 1 Where quotes are provided from speeches, the initials of the politician and the date of the speech are included in brackets. A full list of the speeches included is available upon request.
- 2 The final principle for reform was to “ensure that the benefits and Tax Credits system is affordable in the short and longer term”.
- 3 These 51 references were spread across just 27 speeches and 13 came from one speech by Nick Clegg (NC 13.11.12).
- 4 Quote from a speech by IDS 12.10.11.
- 5 This term was used 12 times across the 82 speeches.
- 6 Work in the UK context by those such as Frances Ryan and Lynne Freidli highlight how political discourse around welfare may have led to harmful effects for disabled people.
- 7 There were 19 references across the 82 speeches associating participation in paid work with “doing the right thing” and eight associating it with “playing by the rules”.

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