

Political Discourse, Public Opinion and the Legitimation of Gendered Welfare Reform

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Abstract

Welfare reform since 2010 has been gendered, with an estimated 80% or more of the savings made through changes to tax and benefits coming from women (Fawcett Society 2015, UKWBG 2015). This paper seeks to understand how the gendered nature of these cuts may have been legitimised. Taking a cue from work that suggests that both political discourse and public opinion matter for policy outcomes, discourse analysis is used to explore the way in which key Coalition politicians justified welfare reform in their speeches between 2010 and 2015, while a series of focus groups explores public attitudes to welfare and welfare reform. This paper argues that welfare policies that disproportionately disadvantage women are legitimised because political welfare discourse and public attitudes to welfare respectively promote and accept paid work as the primary activity associated with welfare rights, while unpaid care (an activity predominantly undertaken by women) is ignored and undervalued.

Introduction

This paper addresses the question as to how gender inequality may persist in the welfare state by analysing 82 welfare speeches made by four key Coalition politicians between 2010 and 2015, as well as by analysing data from a series of four focus groups with the public. The welfare reforms introduced by the Coalition Government between 2010 and 2015, and since continued under the Conservative Governments elected in 2015 and 2017, are adopted here as a case study as these have had a disproportionately negative impact upon women. All in all the Women's Budget Group predicts that by 2020 'women will have borne 81% of the consolidation in personal tax rises and cuts to social security spending' since 2010 (UKWBG, 2015). The Equality and Human Rights Commission have also published an assessment of the cumulative impact assessment of all tax, welfare, social security and national minimum wage changes between 2010 and 2017. This concluded that the impact of these changes has fallen twice as hard on women as on men, with women losing 'more than men from reforms at every income level' (2017, p.4). This report also highlighted that the biggest losers from these changes by household type are lone parents (predominantly women) who 'lose around 15% of their net income on average – almost £1 in every £6' (2017, p.4).

It is little surprise that women have been disproportionately affected by these changes given that they are more likely than men to be reliant on benefits and tax credits. Indeed Fawcett Society estimates that 'on average one-fifth of a woman's income is comprised of benefits and tax credits as opposed to one-tenth of a man's' (2015, p.28). In turn, women's greater reliance on welfare benefits and tax credits (as well as many services which have also been subject to cuts) stems in large part from the fact that, on average they have lower incomes than men, often taking breaks from, or having lower attachment to, the labour market as a result of unpaid work commitments, including care. While the welfare state in the UK, as elsewhere in Europe, is increasingly being recast away from the Male Breadwinner model and towards the Adult Worker Model – with women expected to enter the labour market on the same basis as men – women are still more likely to take on unpaid

care work than men¹ creating increasing tension between women's role as workers and carers (Lewis, 2009). In this context feminist critiques of the welfare state argue that it is vital that the state recognises unpaid work as equal to paid work if we are to have gender equality in welfare policy (Lewis 1997, Pascall 2012).

Building upon feminist literature that explores why there is gender inequality in the welfare state, this article addresses the question as to *how* this inequality is able to persist; in other words, how might welfare policies that damage gender equality be legitimised? In addressing this question, this paper takes a cue from theories of the policymaking process that suggest that both politicians and the public matter for policy outputs. Many contemporary frameworks and models of the policymaking process suggest, to varying degrees, that policymakers have a role in setting the policy agenda but that the public also have a role to play in determining what policies are possible for policymakers to implement without facing electoral retribution (Kingdon, 1995, Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, Sabatier, 1988). Although it is not the intention here to illustrate a causal relationship between political discourse about welfare and public attitudes towards welfare, or vice versa, it is argued that in order to fully explore how welfare policies that have disadvantaged women may have been possible post 2010, it is necessary to look at how these may have been legitimised through both political and public discourse.

Data Collection

This paper draws on an analysis of 82 welfare speeches made between 2010 and 2015 by prominent Coalition politicians, namely the then serving 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).² The majority of these speeches were sourced from the www.gov.uk website and a small number from other publically accessible websites. All speeches made by these four politicians during the course of the Coalition Parliament that referred in some substantial way to welfare reform were included in the analysis. A full explanation as to how the speeches were sourced and selected, including a full list of these, is available upon request. The speeches were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo.

This paper also draws upon data generated through a series of four focus groups conducted with members of the public in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire in spring 2017. Focus groups were selected as the method most appropriate for the study as the aim was to explore how the public make sense of, and evaluate the acceptability of, welfare reforms. In total 40 participants took part in these focus groups and they were asked about their attitudes to welfare, work, poverty and fairness. It is worth noting that they were not asked directly about gender in relation to welfare, this

¹ OECD data published in 2011 suggests on average women do twice as much unpaid work as men (defined as any activity that 'a third person could hypothetically be paid to do' e.g. cooking, cleaning, child care, laundry, pet care and gardening) across the OECD member countries – including the UK. This study also found that non-working mothers spent more than twice as many minutes per day devoted to childcare than non-working fathers (Miranda, 2011). UK specific data includes ONS figures from 2015 that estimated value of unpaid childcare as £132.4 billion, with 69% of that value accounted for by females; and the value of time providing unpaid adult care as £7.97 billion, with 59% accounted for by females. See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/satelliteaccounts/articles/changesinthevalueanddivisionofunpaidcareworkintheuk/2000to2015#main-points>, accessed 8th February 2017.

² Throughout this paper David Cameron is abbreviated to DC, Nick Clegg to NC, Iain Duncan Smith to IDS, and George Osborne to GO.

was because one of the goals of these focus groups was to explore the extent to which gender, and specifically the unequal distribution of care work, may be ignored by the public when thinking and talking about welfare. The focus group discussions were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. As with the political speeches referred to above, the focus group transcripts were analysed in Nvivo. The rest of this article discusses the findings from this analysis.

What was perceived to be the need for reform?

The Coalition Government's proposals for welfare reform were first outlined in their consultation document *21st Century Welfare* (DWP, 2010), published shortly after the 2010 election. This document focused on "making work pay" and creating a "fairer" welfare system; establishing the expectation that those worst off in our society should 'seek work and take work when it is available' (DWP, 2010, p.1). These proposals and subsequent changes enacted by the Welfare Reform Act 2012 came under criticism from those concerned with gender equality for focusing on a supposed lack of personal responsibility among the poor as the root cause of poverty and reliance on the welfare system, and making little or no reference to the barriers to greater economic autonomy that face many women (see Oxfam, 2010, Young Lives, 2010, Chwarea Teg, 2014, Engender, 2015). Coalition welfare speeches followed in the same vein, justifying substantial cuts to welfare benefits based on a perceived need to eradicate "worklessness"³, with those not in paid work characterised as being 'paid to be idle'⁴ and getting "something for nothing"⁵.

Focus group data highlights that the public hold similar views regarding the need for the welfare system to promote paid work. This is largely based on unprompted concerns over the affordability, and therefore the sustainability, of the welfare state. Concerns expressed regarding the sustainability of the welfare state also relate to perceived abuse of the system or a feeling that, prior to reforms introduced in recent years, there was not enough pressure on people receiving benefits to get a job. Here narratives around welfare fraud and (intergenerational) worklessness come to the fore. Participants refer to stories they have heard or read in justification for their concerns – some which are based on questionable evidence⁶.

"[It] can be abused" (Male, Focus Group 1) "Oh yes, it gets abused" (Female, Focus Group 1)

"We are now coming into a stage where we are into the fourth generation of benefits so there are now families who have four generations that have never done anything but been on benefits" (Male, Focus Group 1)

"I've read in the papers every week or every other week there's some case of a person that has been fraudulently claiming for 5,6,7 years...£120,000 in some cases where that money could have gone to someone who needed it more" (Female, Focus Group 1)

³ The terms "worklessness" or "workless" occur 61 times across the 82 speeches analysed. This term is used to describe people who are disengaged from the labour market but also as a synonym for welfare reliance.

⁴ IDS 12.10.11

⁵ The term "something for nothing" appears 12 times across the 82 speeches analysed.

⁶ The quote referring to four generations on benefits contradicts findings from a study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that found that 'even two generations of extensive or permanent worklessness in the same family is a rare phenomenon' (JRF 2012. Are 'Cultures of Worklessness' Passed Down the Generations?).

This idea that the welfare system is being abused, either through welfare fraud or because life on benefits is just too easy, was explicitly expressed by around a quarter of participants and went largely uncontested by the others participating in the discussions. Only a small number countered this view in any way, for example saying that they felt that only a minority of claimants abuse the system or that abuse is portrayed by the media and politicians to be a bigger problem than it actually is. We shall see that potential abuse of the system and intergenerational worklessness were key narratives put forward by the Coalition Government in support of their welfare cuts and it certainly seems as though these messages are likely to have resonated well with the public.

We have briefly explored the way in which Coalition politicians and the public represented the need for reform of welfare in general terms. The rest of this paper unpacks some of the prominent themes within political and public discourse around welfare and explores the possible gendered effects of these.

Paid Work as the Primary Citizenship Activity

Speeches relating to welfare reform made by Coalition politicians promote the value of paid work in two main ways: as intrinsically worthwhile, both for the well-being of individuals and society, and as qualifying individuals for protection through state policy (including welfare protection). Meanwhile, the value of caring is almost completely ignored, with very few references to it as a worthwhile activity or as one that qualifies individuals for protection through policy. Furthermore, not only did Coalition politicians ignore the value of caring but they made very few references to it as a potential barrier to participation in paid work.

Table 1: The number of coded references to both paid work and caring

Reference	Count
Paid work total:	565
As worthwhile activity and/or one that should be encouraged	241
As qualifying the individual for protection through policy	87
Caring total:	51
As worthwhile activity and/or one that should be encouraged	2
As qualifying the individual for protection through policy	3
As a potential barrier to participation in paid work	10

In total, across all 82 speeches analysed there were 1001 pieces of text coded as relating to welfare reform. Of these, 565 were coded as relating to paid work (representing 56% of all coded references); 241 of these directly referenced paid work as a worthwhile activity and/or as an activity that should be encouraged and 87 of these related to the idea that paid work qualifies individuals for protection through policy, including welfare protection⁷. In striking contrast a total of only 51 references were coded as relating to caring in any context (representing 5.1% of all coded

⁷ Other references to paid work include, but are not limited to, the idea that welfare reform is needed to restore fairness to those in work that pay for it (117 references) and negative constructions of life outside of paid work (51 references).

references)⁸. Of these, only two related to caring as a worthwhile activity and/or an activity to be encouraged and three related to caring as qualifying the individual for protection through policy. Furthermore, there were only 10 references (out of a total 1001 coded references) acknowledging caring as a potential barrier to participation in paid work⁹.

The sheer quantity of references to paid work in the context of welfare reform is likely to have reinforced the widespread public acceptance of Victorian self-help ideology and Social Darwinism, strongly associating the deservedness of welfare recipients with their engagement in paid employment. The sections below further unpack the Coalition's narrative relating to the promotion of paid work and compare and contrast this with findings from the focus groups with the public.

Paid Work as Good for Individuals

The narrative constructed and strongly promoted by prominent Coalition politicians through their welfare discourse is that paid work is good for you; having a transformative effect on your life and 'boosting confidence and self-esteem' (IDS 19.09.12).

"...work is about more than just money. It is about what shapes us, lifts our families, delivers security, and helps rebuild our communities" (IDS 23.01.14)

"...work is the surest route out of poverty; it structures lives; unlocks potential; builds confidence; forges friendships; cements communities; provides mental well-being" (NC 11.11.10)

For many it is no doubt true that paid work has positive benefits; however, the satisfaction and sense of self-worth that can be gained by engagement in other types of work (e.g. unpaid domestic work, care work or voluntary community work) is ignored – despite evidence to suggest that these too can have a positive effect on individuals' health and wellbeing (Duncan and Edwards, 1999, Patrick, 2014). Instead welfare reform, including cuts affecting those engaged in unpaid care work, were justified on the basis that only by forcing people into the labour market would they experience the benefits 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)

The public echo this sentiment. When asked 'How important do you think it is that everyone works?' the vast majority said that they thought it was very important. In the quotes below we can see that paid work is felt to be good for one's self-esteem, as well as providing individuals with different experiences and social benefits. On the flip side, the focus group participants talk about how disengagement from the labour market may potentially lead to poor mental health.

"[It's] very important for self-esteem" (Female, Focus Group 1)

⁸ It is also worth noting that these 51 references were spread across just 27 sources and 13 came from one speech by Nick Clegg (made on 13th November 2012).

⁹ Other references to caring included statements on policy relating to childcare such as flexible parental leave, early years education etc., as well as the removal of Child Benefit from families with a higher rate taxpayer.

“My son was out of work for a year, he actually got quite depressed at one point”
(Female, Focus Group 1)

“It’s good for you. People get very depressed not working” (Male, Focus Group 3)

This idealisation of the effects of paid work on one’s self-esteem ignores the fact that, for many, employment does not represent security and dignity, but is characterised by the opposite – insecurity, poor working conditions and low pay. Patrick points out that the potential for paid work to improve one’s physical or mental wellbeing will depend on the type of work, quoting studies that show that ‘low paid, menial and insecure work does not deliver the much hyped rewards and, conversely, insecure work for poverty wages can actually harm family life and individual wellbeing’ (Patrick, 2012, p.7). This type of work is most likely to be the reality for women that are juggling paid work and caring responsibilities, especially in the context of stricter penalties for failure to engage with work related activity since 2010, as well as reduced state support through care related benefits and services. Unpaid care work has been recognised as a qualifying factor in many women’s labour market participation. In 2014 a study by the OECD found, across eight regions of the world, 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 (OECD, 2014). Similarly, Gingerbread, a charity that provides advice and support for single parents, published a report in 2012 in reaction to the removal of Income Support for single parents whose youngest child is five or six; this report explained that 68% of single parents ‘enter low-skilled and low paid work’ often on insecure contracts. They conclude that women previously on a more secure and well paid career path are likely to enter these roles due to the flexibility they offer which better paid jobs may not, rather than due to their appeal to their career aspirations (Gingerbread, 2012, p.3). By ignoring the difficult reality of having to balance unpaid care work and paid work and repeatedly promoting the virtues of paid employment the Coalition were arguably able to justify welfare reforms aimed at punishing “worklessness” while simultaneously failing to invest in care services. The result has been the curtailing of the life chances of many women to work themselves and their families out of poverty, instead potentially consigning them to ‘bump along at the bottom of the earnings ladder’ (Gingerbread, 2012, p.1).

Nevertheless, throughout the Coalition’s welfare discourse, paid work is associated with a life of freedom. Individuals thus engaged are said to have the freedom to ‘secure a better future for themselves and their families’ (IDS 07.04.14). This sense of freedom is associated with independence from the state and with having security and control over one’s future. This picture of freedom and independence is in contrast to the Coalition’s discourse around being “trapped” or “stuck” on benefits¹⁰ and is used to justify increasingly aggressive workfare policies that are more likely to have curtailed the freedom and life choices of many women who care, rather than promoted them. For example, successive tightening of eligibility criteria for lone parents’ access to Income Support has meant that single parents do not have the freedom to choose to provide full time care to their children even if it would be in the best interest of children to do so¹¹ – increasingly making the choice to raise one’s own children the preserve of the middle class and those in relationships.

¹⁰ There are 30 references across the 82 speeches to the idea of being “trapped” on welfare.

¹¹ Parents with a youngest child aged three or over must seek work in order to claim Universal Credit.

Paid Work as Good for Families

One of the ways in which the Coalition Government justified workfare policies that are forcing poor parents to choose paid work over care was through the message that paid work makes people better parents. They claim that a parent in paid work is the ideal role model for children – not only someone to look up to but also someone who will give their children the best start in life by inspiring them to lead a life independent from the state.

“...children with that all-important role model to look up to, offering hope and self-worth, with aspirations for their own future transformed” (IDS 07.04.14)

In 2011 Nick Clegg gave a speech about parenting, explicitly linking working 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)

Once again welfare reforms, including benefit cuts, tighter conditionality and sanctions, were justified in the name of encouraging both men and women into the labour market, regardless of whether they have caring responsibilities – this time on the grounds that it will reduce the number of workless households, make those reliant on welfare better parents and give their children a better life.

“So we are transforming the welfare system to give more out-of-work parents these opportunities” (NC 17.01.11)

Daly has noted that full-time parenting is no longer idealised through policy (2011, p.11)¹². This is supported by the Coalition’s failure to acknowledge the established benefits of children receiving one-to-one care (Waldfogel, 2006) and the fact that unpaid carers of children can and do provide excellent role models for their children. The effect of this, and policy cuts made in line with this sentiment, is to devalue unpaid care and those (predominantly women) who provide it.

The benefits of paid work for the family are reiterated through the Coalition’s discourse relating to “workless” households. Across the speeches analysed there are 25 references to “hardworking families” or “working families”. These are awarded a high moral status throughout the Coalition Government’s welfare discourse, attracting maximum protection through state policy. The moral elevation of “working families” is juxtaposed with the moral denigration of “workless households”. In contrast to “working families” where hope and self-worth flourish, “workless households” are places where children are unlikely to be inspired to work hard nor learn the “work habit” and therefore their futures will likely be bleak and spent in poverty, as “worklessness” and dependency is passed from generation to generation.

“We have one of the highest rates of workless households...Many of the children growing up in these households without a proper role model simply don’t know

¹² This is illustrated by the fact that policy changes have driven employment rates among lone parents up from 43.8% in 1996 to 64.4% in 2015.

what it is to aspire to work – one of the surest routes out of poverty. As a result, their life prospects are severely curtailed and so the cycle of dependency repeats itself across the generations” (IDS 03.11.10)

Data from the focus groups show that the public similarly accept participation in paid work as an important part of good parenting. Again, demonstrating an acceptance of the primacy of paid work over care some felt that it was important for lone parents to work in order to set a good example to their children:

“It’s also social responsibility and education for the child. If you haven’t got somebody in your family that’s showing you that this is what you do with your life you do contribute to society and you do work and that these are the rewards, maybe not even instant but long term” (Male, Focus Group 2)

In this context the public are generally willing to accept conditionality and sanctions to encourage people to look for work and take it when it is offered, including for lone parents. This finding echoes the outcome of previous studies that have highlighted high levels of public support for sanctions for lone parents on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) that refuse job offers or interviews – with over two thirds (68%) agreeing that they should lose at least some of their benefits, 37% agreeing that they should lose at least half, and 7% agreeing that they should ‘lose all their benefits, regardless of what hardship it causes’ (O’Brien, 2011).

Despite a substantial decrease in the percentage of lone parent households with dependent children that are workless (from 51.9% in 1996 to 32.4% in 2015), over two thirds (67.4%) of children living in “workless” households still live in lone parent households¹³ (likely due to the continued difficulty of lone parents to juggle paid work and childcare). With 90% of lone parents being women¹⁴ this idea within political and public discourse around welfare, that work makes you a better parent, may have helped to legitimise the introduction of cuts to benefits and services that have disproportionately disadvantaged women over men.

Paid Work and the Right to Protection through Policy

Having established the importance and value of paid work, this allowed Coalition politicians to justify rewards for good behaviour (i.e. engagement in paid work) and punishment for bad behaviour (i.e. disengagement from the labour market). Coalition welfare discourse makes it clear that “hard workers” (those engaged in paid employment) can expect protection through policy. As noted above, across the speeches analysed there are 87 references associating engagement in paid work and an individual or family qualifying for protection through government policy (compared to only three associating caring with the right to such protection).

¹³ Labour Force Survey, ONS (2015):

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/workingandworklesshouseholds/2015-10-06>, accessed 23rd February 2017.

¹⁴ ONS data from the Labour Force Survey:

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2015-11-05#lone-parents>, accessed 12th September 2016.

Those who engage in paid work are said to be “doing the right thing” and “playing by the rules”¹⁵ and are therefore promised a government that is on their side, one that cuts taxes and protects their pensions. Meanwhile those who are not engaged in paid work are threatened with welfare cuts and greater conditionality.

“Another...shared mission is what the Deputy Prime Minister calls ‘alarm clock Britain’, what I call being on the side of people who work hard and want to get on” (DC 16.07.12)

“I’m proud to be in a government that has introduced a triple lock that ensures a fair and generous increase in the state pension every year to those who’ve worked hard all their lives” (GO 05.12.13)

“...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)

The link between work and protection through policy is so well established that if not actually in paid work people are expected to mimic paid work to qualify for welfare assistance or face sanctions.

“...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)

“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 requiring everyone to sign up to a Claimant Commitment as a condition of entitlement to benefit – it is deliberately set to mimic a contract of employment... setting out what individuals must do in return for state support” (IDS 07.04.14)

Bochel and Powell suggest that the Coalition Government ‘took up and expanded Labour’s rhetoric of conditionality’ (2016, p.11) and attitudes to welfare among focus group participants seem to support this move. As noted above, participants were supportive of sanctions as a means of correcting the behaviour of those on benefits; ensuring people look for work and take it when it is available. When discussing sanctions some participants draw upon similar contractual narratives to those we see in the Coalition’s discourse.

“If any of us find ourselves in breach of a contract...” (Female, Focus Group 2)

“If someone else has to pay for you you have to abide by their rules” (Male, Focus Group 2)

When it comes to the level of sanction participants feel is reasonable for non-compliance with their job seeking requirements, most agree with the recipient losing around 50% of their benefits, while others would support 100% sanction for repeated offenses.

¹⁵ There are 19 references across the 82 speeches to the idea that to participate in paid work is to “do the right thing”; similarly, there are eight references to the idea that to work is to “play by the rules”.

“About 50% I would say” (Male, Group 2) “I would say half, yeah” (Female, Focus Group 2)

“I think that would hopefully put people off...stop them doing it again” (Female, Focus Group 2)

When asked about potential exemptions to those that should be subject to sanctions, many felt that the mentally and physically disabled should be excluded, and some feel that elderly should also be exempt as it might be particularly difficult for them to find work or they would be especially vulnerable to cuts to their benefits. Only one person felt that those with children should be exempt through the fear that any sanction would inadvertently punish the children. Most were comfortable with the idea that parents, including lone parents, should be subject to sanctions if in breach of their work-related activity conditions as long as they are provided with clear guidance on the circumstances under which these would be applied. This willingness among focus group participants to support sanctions for all but the mentally and physically disabled seems to reinforce the idea the public see the welfare system as a tool for encouraging paid work among all those of working age that are physically able to engage in such work, with little regard for caring commitments that may make this difficult for some.

Recognising Caring?

We have seen that paid work is promoted through Coalition discourse as valuable and transformative for individuals and families, while the value of unpaid work, including caring, is ignored. Across all of the speeches analysed, politicians make only two references to caring as a valuable activity:

“...thank you for what you do. If you give up caring for your children - who are now young [disabled] adults - if you give up, then we are weaker as a society. We really rely on and we praise you for what you do (DC 10.08.10)”¹⁶

“...there are those with important caring responsibilities to their families and others not seeking work. They will never be included in a drive for full employment” (GO 31.03.14)

Although these two references recognise caring as valuable, neither suggests that the government has a role to play in supporting it. Indeed, as already noted, of the 1001 passages of text coded as relating to welfare reform, only three associated in any way the provision of protection through welfare benefits or tax credits with the activity of caring. One mentioned the higher earnings disregards within Universal Credit for lone parents, the other the increase in the child element of tax credits in line with inflation. The third made a general pledge of extra provision for those that care or have dependants. The fact that Coalition politicians made so few references to caring as qualifying individuals to protection through policy sent a clear message: participation in paid employment earns you the right to maximum protection through policy while caring qualifies you for the bare minimum.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that this quote is not from a pre-planned speech but is a response to a question from a member of the public during a Prime Minister’s Q&A session. Having had experience of caring for his own disabled son, David Cameron arguably gives a personal response, rather than a policy position.

But the concern here is not only that the Coalition Government ignore the inherent value of caring and the economic contribution that unpaid carers (the majority of whom are women) make to society and our economy (ONS data from 2015 put the value of unpaid work at the equivalent of 56% of GDP¹⁷), but also that they fail to recognise caring as a reality – a genuine barrier to many women’s greater participation in the labour market. By cutting benefits in the name of “making work pay”¹⁸ the Coalition did nothing to address this barrier; indeed, cuts to services are likely to have increased the care burden on women and made labour market participation more difficult for many (Fawcett Society, 2012).

Across the 82 speeches analysed, there were 10 references across only seven speeches that acknowledged caring responsibilities as a potential barrier to participation in paid work. Four of these 10 references come from one speech by Nick Clegg in 2012 in which he acknowledges the societal expectations and the financial factors that often impair women’s labour market attachment.

“Even when the children are grown up, working full time isn’t possible for many women. With the population living longer, we’ve seen the emergence of the so-called sandwich generation: 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)

An additional four references were made relating to help with childcare through Universal Credit and tax-free childcare¹⁹. On one occasion this is presented by George Osborne as rationale for stricter conditionality for lone parents:

“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)

Across all of his speeches on welfare reform, David Cameron made only one reference to caring responsibilities being a potential barrier to participation in paid work, and again this was in the context of calling for stricter conditionality for single parents:

“And we also need to ask if single parents living on benefits can do more to prepare for work...Before this Government came to office, single parents weren’t required to look for work until their youngest child was seven years old – up to three years after they’ve started primary school. We thought that needed changing – so we’re bringing it down to five years-old...But 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” (DC 25.06.12)

¹⁷ <http://visual.ons.gov.uk/the-value-of-your-unpaid-work/> Accessed 8th February 2017.

¹⁸ Across the 82 speeches there were 94 references to the idea that the welfare system should make work pay.

¹⁹ The latter is a policy whereby the government pays 20% of childcare costs up to a total of £10,000 per year. There were an additional six references by George Osborne to tax-free childcare across the speeches analysed but these were policy statements and did not explicitly refer to caring as a barrier to participation in paid work.

He goes on to admit that it may be hard for lone parents to fit in paid work within 15 hours of childcare but takes the opportunity to establish the expectation that those parents will be using that time to participate in mandatory work related activity.

“...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 fails to acknowledge or value any unpaid domestic work that may be associated with the caring of children and makes clear that lone parents should be doing all they can to prepare themselves for economic activity to be undertaken as soon as possible.

Overall, just 1% of all coded references acknowledge caring responsibilities as a potential barrier to participation in paid work. This seems especially inadequate considering the disproportionate impact of welfare cuts on women and lone parents in particular – for example, according to the DWP’s own data 66% of claimants affected by the Benefit Cap are single females and 61% of all households affected are lone mothers (DWP, 2016). Furthermore, while the Coalition were ignoring the existence of caring as a potential barrier to labour market participation they were also failing to invest in childcare which may have helped more women take up paid work. Between 2009-10 and 2012-13 there was a 29% reduction in spending on targeted support for childcare – meanwhile Child Tax Credit and Child Benefit payments were frozen in cash terms and universal Child Benefit was removed from families with a higher-rate taxpayer (Lupton et al., 2015, p.21).

Among the public there seems to be considerable confusion in relation to when the state does and does not support caring in the case of lone parents. Until 2008 lone parents, not in paid work, could receive income support until their youngest child turned 16. Between 2008 and 2010 this was incrementally reduced to seven. The Welfare Reform Act of 2012 introduced under the Coalition Government lowered this to five. This trend has continued under the current Conservative Government; the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 has legislated that from 2017 parents of pre-school age children (three and four year olds) will also be required to seek work and be available for work, while those with two year olds will be required to attend work focused interviews, and those with one year olds will be expected to undertake work preparation activities or face losing some or all of their benefits. When asked, most people felt that lone parents were required to look for work when their youngest child starts primary school. When the reality of the point at which lone parents are transferred onto JSA was explained some felt that this was too soon, while others expressed the view that it makes sense to get lone parents into work as long as there is a net gain for the state in doing so. In other words, participants think lone parents should work as long as the cost of subsidising their childcare and/or their tax credit payments is less than what was being spent on their Income Support. This echoes the lack of value placed on care within the home in the Coalition’s discourse, as well as the promotion of paid work as the primary citizenship activity.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how the Coalition Government’s welfare discourse not only ignored caring as a reality of many women’s lives, but also as a worthwhile and valuable activity. It has also shown that this discourse promoted paid work in such a way as to devalue other, non-paid, work. With paid work established as the primary citizenship activity, the role of the welfare state was constructed to

be to encourage labour market participation and not to support those unable to participate. Coalition politicians reinforced the message time and again that the system should punish “worklessness” and make work pay, moving away from the post-war vision of the welfare state as social security to one of it as an instrument to promote behaviour change. It is argued that this discourse helped to pave the way for cuts to benefits and services aimed at those with low attachment to the labour market, a group predominantly made up of women. Similarly, this article has shown that focus group participants support policies that discourage “worklessness” – again defined as a lack of engagement in paid work – and generally ignore the value of care. In particular, while the public show some sympathy for those juggling caring and work, there is little support for benefits for lone parents (the group most effected by the Coalition cuts).

In light of these findings, it is argued that the way in which welfare is discussed in political and public discourse may be helping to perpetuate gender inequality by legitimising cuts to benefits and services that impact most upon those with no, or low, attachment to the labour market (most likely to be women). Acknowledging the potential role of political and public discourse in legitimising gender inequality is an important first step in moving towards a more gender equal welfare state. Ultimately, it is not enough to count the cost of gender inequality in welfare policy; we must also look at *how* this is happening if we are to overcome this.

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