

Gendered economic inequalities: a social policy perspective

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ABSTRACT

This commentary addresses gender inequalities from a social policy perspective. It extends the analysis by Andrew et al. in this collection; focuses on lower incomes and social security; and recognizes both individual financial autonomy and interdependence as central. The commentary discusses labour market issues, including how to improve security and in-work progression for women in particular. Policy proposals are also made to limit the disruptions to women's working lives by care for elderly or disabled people. More broadly, the commentary argues that a key question for any policy is whether it will help transform gender roles and relationships, to allow both sexes to fulfil their capabilities to the full. In addition, both male disadvantage and inequalities and economic dependence within households require more attention. Impact analysis should therefore explore not only distribution between households at the time but also potential effects on individual women and men over the life course. A balance is needed between moves towards economic independence and recognition of past, and continuing, inequalities. Policies can potentially tackle gender inequalities directly, and norms and values that may affect them indirectly. Proposals are put forward for changes in 'family policy', including towards second earners, parental leave and childcare. Finally, the commentary argues that the combination of a focus on autonomy and agency for all with awareness of our interdependence as a society and wider world means that gender issues must be central to the Deaton Review, not just for their own sake but also in a broader context.

Key words: gender inequalities; social policy; economic independence; family policy; gender perspective

Introduction

This commentary addresses gender inequalities from a social policy perspective. Social policy has key concerns—'human need, social justice, and individual and collective well-being ... [It is] the academic study, prescription and practice of ways in which governments can best distribute and redistribute resources to provide and deliver welfare facilities, services and opportunities'.¹ Social policy has fuzzy boundaries; many types of policy have social impacts, and social policy is interdisciplinary in nature. But the clue is in the name—social policy places emphasis on the role of policies, and forensically examines the aims, functions, implementation and consequences (intended and unintended) of policies affecting individual and social well-being.

This commentary emphasizes those on low income, given the concern of social policy with well-being and its traditional association with (re)distribution. And within social policy, a commitment to gender analysis includes questioning taken-for-granted categories, concepts and policy priorities in 'mainstream' studies across disciplines. Indeed, 'gender being central to social policy and the welfare state is now taken for granted' (Shaver 2018, p. 1).

Gender is seen here (Shaver 2018, p. 2) as not mere biological difference—though this may have unequal consequences—but as a social construction. Gender is the basis for social identities and collective social arrangements; a key feature of the social

structure shaping relationships and hierarchies; and at the root of complex social inequalities. Feminist economists have also challenged mainstream analysis in economics,² with the UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) subjecting Budgets and spending reviews to systematic gender analysis.

Social policy commentators applying a gender lens increasingly adopt an intersectional perspective (Daly 2020). In some cases, small sample sizes can be a challenge in this endeavour, and several years' data may be needed. But fine-grained analysis is required to reveal the intersectional complexities of gender inequalities in the labour market. This commentary also argues that a gender perspective cannot be limited to consideration of women and should also examine men's situations, especially when these lead to disadvantage.

This commentary therefore complements the article on gender inequalities in the labour market by Andrew et al. in this collection, by extending the analysis beyond those of working age, focusing particularly on the lower end of the income distribution and social security provisions for income maintenance and having at its heart a recognition of the centrality of both individual financial autonomy and interdependence and caring to gender analysis and to society as a whole.

More generally, this commentary argues that gender analysis should inform the overall consideration of inequalities in the

¹ Social Policy Association at <http://www.social-policy.org.uk/>.

² In the academic field, see, for example, the journal *Feminist Economics*, <http://www.feministeconomics.net/>.

Deaton Review as a whole, and that policies should be formulated and assessed in relation to their gender impact. This is partly because, instead of focusing on a snapshot of households at one time, as is often done when assessing economic inequality, analysis with a gender perspective highlights individuals' income over the life course. Limiting analysis to a snapshot of inequality between households is understandable, given the paucity of data to do otherwise (Ponthieux and Meurs 2015, p. 983), but the constraints thus imposed on our ability to judge what they call 'individuals' economic well-being' demand discussion. The National Equality Panel (Hills 2010) devoted a chapter of its report to (net) individual income. The Deaton Review should give this perspective at least equal prominence both in its conceptual framing of the issues and in its conclusions.

Gender inequalities in the labour market

Andrew and colleagues, in their article in this collection, examine differences between women and men in labour force participation, hourly pay rates (the 'gender pay gap') and wages/salaries. They describe these, ask why they should be of concern, discuss the causes and consequences and question what should be done. This section considers, first, issues raised by an examination of gender inequalities in the labour market and, subsequently, wider gender inequalities across the life course, including within the household and outside the sphere of employment.

Andrew and colleagues discuss women's increasing labour force participation. Rubery and Figueiredo (2018) argue that 'integration' is key—women's employment as integral and permanent rather than marginal and temporary. The degree of integration certainly varies between countries, but the central place of women in the labour market seems increasingly assured.

One answer to the question of why we should care about gender inequalities in the labour market is because of concerns of fairness and equity. This goes wider than economic well-being or equality. Employment is linked to improved mental health for mothers, and work matters over and above its influence on income (Harkness 2018, p. 124). But another reason often put forward is because misallocation of talent damages the economy. This argument can be augmented. Nieuwenhuis et al. (2019), for example, find that, amongst 42 high- and middle-income countries, those in which many women have an income of their own have lower levels of relative poverty. Other ideas have included the need for full labour market performance by women to maintain the desired European model of social protection, and/or to encourage fertility (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002). However, feminist economists have challenged instrumentalist arguments for gender equality (McKay et al. 2013; Karamessini and Rubery 2014), arguing that it should instead count as central in its own right.

However, the counterpart to women's increasing integration in the labour market is perhaps the introduction/intensification of conditionality for many women, as activation is prioritized (in part due to the supply side emphasis in economics from the mid-1990s). Initially, in the UK, the age of the youngest child—the stage at which lone parents had to seek work—was progressively reduced. More recently, childless partners and then 'main carers' in couples have also been included in increasingly stringent conditions; but, unlike in Australia and Denmark, this has not led to access to income in their own right within the means-tested benefits system (Ingold 2011). Indeed, the design of Universal Credit, the all-in-one means-tested benefit bringing together six 'legacy' means-tested benefits and tax credits in the UK, not only has no provision for partial individualization in assessment for

couples (Millar, 2003) but also includes a single payment into one account by default (Howard and Bennett 2021). And these additional responsibilities are not always matched by commensurate duties on others (including government and employers) to 'level the playing field' for women and men at work and at home (Bennett 2017).

Whilst women may be increasingly integrated into employment, the nature of that employment is changing. Self-employment now accounts for about 15% of the UK labour market,³ some of this in 'gig economy' work. It is generally lower paid than employment, and 31% of new entrants were previously 'inactive' (Giupponi and Xu 2020). Women are the majority of new entrants since 2008; see WBG (2020). For some, this may be a response to extended and intensified conditionality (which does not apply to the genuinely self-employed) and/or a lack of opportunities in traditional employment. Women make up nearly three in five of the part-time self-employed, and the weekly gender pay gap is 12 percentage points higher than for full-time employees (WBG 2020). Citizens Advice (2015) warned of 'bogus' self-employment increasing in traditionally female-dominated sectors such as caring and cleaning. [The other sectors in these '5 Cs' are cashiering, catering and clerical work (WBG 2020).] In addition, self-employed people have less comprehensive social protection, including at the time of childbirth and beyond, which could be improved. This suggests that social protection for the self-employed should be improved, with the proposal to increase their national insurance contributions reintroduced as a *quid pro quo* for this and their recent gains from getting access to the higher new state pension (Bennett 2019).

Although increasing insecurity in the labour market may be contested,⁴ women make up 74% of part-time (and 57% of involuntarily part-time) workers, and 54% of temporary workers and those on zero hours contracts (WBG 2020). The Trades Union Congress (hereafter TUC) (TUC 2017) also notes how difficult short-notice changes in expected working hours can be for those on zero hours contracts with caring responsibilities. The government is proceeding with the creation of a single enforcement body for employment rights.⁵ But for employees and workers, the wider 'good work' agenda should be progressed to give them greater protection, rather than the Employment Bill being postponed, as appears to be the case at the time of writing.

Causes of gender inequalities in the labour market

The 'onset of parenthood' is identified as a driver of gender inequalities in the labour market. In practice, this means motherhood, as Rake in a report for the Cabinet Office stressed over two decades ago now (Rake 2000). Joyce (2018) suggests that there is a range of factors at play here, including access to a narrower range of jobs, probably in less productive firms closer to home; prioritizing of family-friendly conditions over high pay; and lower bargaining power, resulting in lower remuneration.

The time since the first child's birth is often taken as a point at which to measure gender inequalities in the labour market.

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabour2018.pdfmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/labourmarketeconomiccommentary/may2019>.

⁴ See, for example, CIPD (2019), https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/7904-megatrends-insecurity-report-final_tcm18-61556.pdf.

⁵ House of Commons Hansard, Written Statements 8 June 2021, cols. 40WS-41WS.

But the impact of having more than one child is also important, with employment falling for mothers of larger families. Skinner (2005) forensically examined the logistics involved, especially the time needed to take children to and from childcare/education and for parents to get to and from work—including ‘trip chaining’ (Hasluck and Green 2005)—which she argued was insufficiently taken into account in policy debates. The contribution of fathers was often ferrying children to and fro.

Economists highlight the loss of human capital, as mothers exit from employment for some time, and often return to part-time rather than full-time hours, because of the gendered division of labour. However, Grant et al. (2006), noting that many women continued part-time work after children grew up, found over half in low-paid part-time jobs ‘working below their potential’, not using their skills or experience, or qualifications. Mothers often get stuck, in other words. And, whilst many women may choose to work part-time, the researchers concluded that by and large they did not choose to squander their skills, abilities and earnings potential. Rubery and Figueiredo (2018) argue that, whilst working hours may be influenced by social policy provision, they are also a product of a country’s labour market model, and Grant et al. concluded that there were too few part-time jobs at an appropriate level for the skills and experience of all the women seeking part-time work. D’Arcy and Finch (2017), finding women significantly less likely to escape low pay, suggested that ‘in-work conditionality’ in Universal Credit might push women into full-time work. Such in-work conditionality is unpopular, and at the time of writing had not yet been introduced fully, in part due to lack of evidence about what works; but in the 2023 Spring Budget, the Government announced several measures to advance this agenda further.⁶

Mothers may also be reluctant to take a job that, whilst paying a little more, has more rigid hours and more responsibility as a *quid pro quo*. The gendered division of labour is not limited to housework and childcare alone. Day-to-day household budget management is often undertaken by mothers in low-income families (Bennett and Sung 2013), when making the money stretch is burdensome. Given the additional demands of Universal Credit, including reporting changes of circumstances monthly, and potentially also fulfilling conditionality, research on couples (Griffiths et al. 2020) concludes that for many women there is ‘no let-up’. (It can of course be argued that the human capital acquired in managing a household’s budget and its relationships with officialdom of various sorts should be valued more in rewards in the labour market.) The operation of complex means-tested benefits can affect the time and energy available for employment. We should be more concerned not just about income poverty but also about time poverty, which Burchardt (2008) found affected lone parents in particular.

Add to this parents’ awareness of their children’s need for stability, without disruptive changes in childcare arrangements, and barriers to in-work progression make complete sense. And many low-income mothers have no cushion of savings or assets for support when contemplating taking risks (Millar and Ridge 2017). Andy Haldane, when he was the Bank of England’s chief economist, suggested that labour market insecurity may make people less willing to move to better-paid jobs.⁷ This again implicates the UK’s labour market model, in addition to our

(over)emphasis on means-tested benefits and conditionality. The current focus on progression,⁸ including the report of the Commission on In-Work Progression, makes it imperative that these key issues are understood. The Commission should focus on low-income women, especially those with children, as a priority group in its considerations and forthcoming recommendations.

Less attention is paid to care for disabled and elderly people and its relationship with the labour market (Lewis 2009), despite growing need due to more disabled children surviving and the ageing of the population. Women are more likely to be unpaid carers, caring for over 50 hours per week, and to give up work or reduce working hours because of caring. Women have a 50:50 chance of providing care by age 59, men by 75.⁹ So, although this care is less gendered in nature, due to men caring for their partners, labour market issues affect women in particular; the raising of the UK’s state pension age, especially for women, is also relevant. The often long-term nature of care for disabled and elderly people probably means employers playing less of a role. But the government should introduce a statutory right to (longer) short-term leave for carers, as recommended by the Women and Equalities Committee (2016), and the right to flexibility at work (not just a right to request). There are also calls for carer’s allowance to be increased and the qualifying conditions made more flexible. A carer’s right to income should not depend on a transfer from the person for whom they care.

Grant et al. (2006) criticized inadequate support for mature women wanting to retrain. This has if anything worsened, with real spending on nonapprentice adult education decreasing by two-thirds since 2003, and adults in further education falling from 4.4 to 1.5 million since 2004, although a Lifetime Skills Guarantee is now being rolled out for those without A levels or the equivalent.¹⁰ Whilst women are more educationally equal now, on-the-job training is often key to progression and can compensate potentially for the effects of having children, especially for women leaving education after school (Blundell et al. 2019). But low-income women, especially those with children, can find it hard to take on educational loans.

The gender pay gap is higher in the private sector, and women have also often found it easier to train and progress in the public sector. Women are some two-thirds of all, and nine-tenths of part-time, public sector employees (WBG 2020). They are therefore especially vulnerable to public service spending cuts. According to Table 5 of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) public sector employment statistics,¹¹ if we exclude reclassifications (e.g. nationalizations of banks), then the public workforce went from 19.2% of employment in June 2010 to 16.2% in September 2019. The routes governments choose to follow in crises, in addition to the UK’s labour market model and social protection system, are also critical to gender inequalities in the labour market.

in the 21st Century’ (2 March 2020), <https://www.spi.ox.ac.uk/article/the-costs-of-income-insecurity-for-uk-households>.

⁸ See, for example, the Institute for Social and Economic Research, <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/2019/10/22/gender-equality-at-work-our-new-government-commissioned-research-on-the-barriers-to-women-s-progression>.

⁹ From Carers UK (sources on website): <https://www.carersuk.org/news-and-campaigns/features/10-facts-about-women-and-caring-in-the-uk-on-international-women-s-day>.

¹⁰ The government announced a National Skills Fund of £2.5bn in 2020. See ‘Will UK skills crisis be fixed by vocational education plan?’, by B. Staton and P. Foster in *Financial Times* (28 January 2021), from Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS).

¹¹ See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/publicsectorpersonnel/datasets/publicsectoremploymentreferencetable>.

⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spring-budget-2023-labour-market-factsheet/spring-budget-2023-factsheet-labour-market-measures> (15 March 2023) for more information.

⁷ See, for example, ‘Bank of England chief economist lays out the costs of income insecurity for UK households’ at an Oxford seminar ‘Income insecurity

Norms and values and a capability approach

Of course, one of the reasons for the persistence of gender inequalities in the labour market and elsewhere is the allocation of women and men to different roles, and the gendered norms and expectations that underlie this. It is too easy to see these as mere individual choices (e.g. [Hakim 2000](#)). Amartya Sen's theory of 'adaptive preferences' ([Nussbaum 2001](#)) suggests that desires may be adapted to (constrained) personal circumstances. Analysis also shows the impact of collective negotiations and understandings of what is right and socially acceptable on individual behaviours ([Duncan and Edwards 1999](#)). And norms are not free floating but instead are embedded in institutions, cultures and policies ([Hobson 2011](#)), and change over time, across cultures and within groups—including norms affecting men and boys ([Burrell et al. 2019](#)).

Thus, society not only responds to parenthood but also shapes women's and men's 'choices'. But, although progress in changing gendered norms may be slow, preferences can be malleable. So, for example, attitudes to formal childcare can change with experience of it, creating a 'policy multiplier effect' ([Himmelweit and Sigala 2004](#)); neither circumstances nor identities are fixed, and feedback effects operate at the social and individual levels. This complexity makes for daunting challenges, but also opens the door to change.

A key question to ask of any policy is not only whether it will make women's and men's 'choices' easier, but also whether it will help to transform the existing gender roles and relationships currently constraining these, to allow both sexes to fulfil their capabilities to the full ([Bennett 2017](#)).¹² The capability framework was proposed by Amartya Sen as a counterweight to utility ([Robeyns 2017](#)), to assess the freedoms people have to achieve the functionings (what they are and do) that they have reason to value.

It is often assumed that, for couples, gender equality would mean that both partners (especially female/male) would share unpaid and paid work 50/50. But a capability approach would instead suggest creating real freedom in practice for women and men to decide how to share these tasks ([Lewis and Giullari 2005](#); [Hobson 2011](#)). (Lewis and Giullari note, however, that one person's capabilities can constrain another's; this reminds us of unequal power within relationships, and the potential for domestic abuse.) A capability approach does not have a low bar ([Ciccia and Sainsbury 2018](#)); bringing about the conditions under which different couples have genuine freedom to choose their combinations of paid and unpaid work ([Orloff 2009](#)) is a significant challenge. It depends in particular on change in men's lives.

Bringing men in

[Shaver \(2018, p. 1\)](#) argues that men used to be taken as given—seen as the norm; but they have gender too. Andrew and colleagues highlight the relative decrease in lower-educated men's earnings and increase in male part-timers. [Johnson \(2018\)](#) emphasizes the volume of incapacity benefits claims by low-educated young men for mental health issues and possible threats from Brexit to men with skills and decent wages but low academic qualifications.

[Dermott \(2015\)](#) highlighted high male poverty rates in the 2012 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey, noting especially less than

full-time work, health problems, older retired widowerhood and nonresident children. The last category reminds us of the need to take account of inter- as well as intrahousehold distribution. And [Demey et al. \(2013\)](#) used retrospective life histories to explore disadvantage, finding that men living alone included those who seemed more disadvantaged than solo women, often lacking family resources as well.

In a crisis in particular, men may feel ashamed of being unable to provide for their families, whilst women's money management role may become more important ([Fodor 2006](#)). There has been too little research into men's poverty, its nature and its causes ([Bennett and Daly 2014](#)), as well as male disadvantage more generally. We need to pay these issues more attention.

Gender inequalities within the household

Gender analysis involves examining individual access to income and other resources over the life course, not just inequality between households at one point in time. Here, the focus is on income, but time and assets are also crucial resources. In today's context of growing family fluidity, limiting analysis to the household/family unit is increasingly constraining, especially if gender inequalities are of concern ([Bennett 2017](#)). Moreover, shared life events, such as relationship breakdown, can affect women's and men's economic outcomes differently. [Levell et al. \(2015\)](#) proposed assessing economic well-being over a lifetime.

This is not the same as arguing for individualism; a gender perspective counters the idea of free-floating individuals ([Giddens 1991](#)) with a recognition of interdependence, and of caring relationships connecting us all. But the argument above does highlight concern about economic dependence within relationships, which is more likely for women, and potentially risky. In her qualitative research, [Griffiths \(2017\)](#) found low-income lone mothers often unwilling to give up their financial independence by entering new partnerships with men whose income would lead to joint assessment of the couple for means-tested benefits.

Living together creates economies of scale, and resources are usually shared. But studies suggest deprivation in female/male couples is more likely for women ([Cantillon 2013](#)), and above this level, resources are not necessarily shared equally either, as often assumed ([Ponthieux 2013](#); [Lechene et al. 2019](#)). [Ponthieux \(2017\)](#) developed a measure of intrahousehold 'modified' equivalized income in order to explore couples' incomplete income pooling across the distribution. (As she also notes, pooling and equality are not necessarily the same.)

Focusing on the degree of sharing is arguably insufficient. Not all forms of resources are equal. [Robeyns \(2003, p. 65\)](#) argued: 'even if household income were shared completely, it is problematic to assume that it does not matter in a well-being assessment whether a person has earned this money herself, or obtained it from her partner'. These issues are linked: [Karagiannaki and Burchardt \(2020\)](#), examining complex households in Europe, find that the risk of deprivation in most countries is significantly less likely for individuals contributing a higher share of household income.

Work on intrahousehold distribution of resources also often distinguishes between forms of income. [Zelizer \(1994\)](#) showed how the source of income can matter for its relative importance within a household, power for its recipient and its use(s); money is neither neutral nor completely fungible. Indeed, [Joyce and Xu \(2019\)](#) also noted that the form, not just amount, of income may matter. Their example was the difference between male breadwinner wages and (increasing) reliance of low-income families on

¹² [Burchardt and Vizard \(2011\)](#) used a 'capability approach' to develop a measure of substantive freedoms and opportunities for the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

benefits to support low incomes, and the potential impact of this on 'people's sense of dignity and self-worth'.

But that is only one side of the story. A 'second earner' may be motivated to get a job by the opportunity to obtain income of their own. By contrast, financial coercion (part of economic abuse, a form of domestic abuse) may involve a perpetrator sabotaging such attempts. This perspective emphasizes autonomy—investigated in relation to low-/moderate-income female/male couples by [Sung and Bennett \(2013\)](#). They found women more aware of tensions between togetherness and autonomy, due to their greater responsibility for managing togetherness and lower likelihood of achieving financial independence.

Assessments of current policies and proposed changes should therefore examine their implications for gender roles and relationships, including within-household inequalities, and autonomy and agency for women and men. Impact analysis could also explore not only distribution between households at the time but also potential effects of different kinds of resources on individual women and men over the life course ([Veitch and Bennett 2010](#), drawing on [Daly and Rake 2003](#)).

Policy debates have been clouded for too long by concepts such as 'workless', 'work rich versus work poor' or 'working' households, and 'in-work poverty'—all obfuscating the nuanced analysis necessary to develop effective policies for individuals within these households. Insensitivity to intrahousehold dynamics, distribution and gender roles is clearly demonstrated in statements in the business case for Universal Credit that it did not examine intrahousehold distribution, and that it assumed that one partner's working hours did not affect the other, and that anyone could get the working hours they wanted ([Department for Work and Pensions 2018](#)).

[Browne \(2011\)](#), having analysed changes in tax and benefits by gendered household, describes the challenges in analysing individual income in couples, including not just lack of knowledge about resource sharing but also the difficulty of allocating benefits between individuals in households ([Bennett 2013](#)). However, cumulative analysis of the effects of tax/benefit changes for the Equality and Human Rights Commission ([Portes and Reed 2018](#)) did focus on individual incomes, albeit having to model certain allocations between partners for some sources.

This suggests a focus on earnings and earnings replacement benefits—incomes people receive in their own right—separately from means-tested benefits, which depend on a partner's presence, needs, resources and actions.¹³ Including individual income other than earnings widens the analysis beyond those in paid work. [Ponthieux \(2010\)](#) did this for 'in-work poverty', including earnings and earnings replacement benefits, and showing that men were more likely to live in in-work poverty due to their family situation (including partners without their own income), and women were more likely to do so due to their work situation (low pay, part-time hours, etc.).

If promoting the autonomy, agency and capabilities of women and men is key, both services and income are important, and income should mean assured access to adequate independent resources ([Bennett and Daly 2014](#)). Some non-means-tested benefits compensate for additional costs (e.g. for disability), or are intended for spending on others (such as child benefit). Others, however, provide income maintenance—contributory and noncontributory earnings replacement benefits. These have been

neglected recently (although access to maternity allowance was made easier) and have been sidelined during the pandemic; instead, new social policy instruments such as the furlough scheme had to be developed. It is now time for discussion about improving non-means-tested benefits. Debates on 'in-work poverty' usually ignore how non-means-tested benefits for nonearning partners are part of the solution to poverty for one-earner couples ([Bennett and Sutherland 2011](#)).

In the pandemic, a large number of Universal Credit applicants had their claims rejected because of their partner's earnings/savings, and many saw this as unfair ([Baumberg Geiger et al. 2020](#)). This may apply in particular to younger couples, who are more likely to have independent finances. A recent study also found joint savings, investments and debts decreasing in UK couples ([Kan and Laurie 2014](#)). Couples also tend to see pensions as individual rather than joint now ([Wood et al. 2012](#)). Individually based non-means-tested benefits should be improved, in terms of both qualifying conditions and amounts payable. One reason for doing this is to reduce reliance on jointly means-tested benefits, which are less likely to provide security for individuals.

However, emphasizing individual income without taking account of caring responsibilities risks exposing women to greater disadvantage. If individuals are held increasingly responsible for their own welfare and self-investment, they can end up bearing more of the costs of caring ([Lewis 2009](#)); caring involves investing in others. Women have been caught in a pincer movement, as additions to benefits for dependants or survivors were removed on the one hand and contribution conditions to qualify for many individually based benefits were tightened on the other. Moreover, any pension above a minimum (the 'new state pension') is now private, and thus subject to market forces likely to disadvantage women given their relative labour market position. There is a tightrope to walk in balancing moves towards economic independence with recognition of previous—and potentially continuing—inequalities. But policies can be explored that move in the right direction.

The role of policies

Policies can potentially affect gender inequalities directly, and the norms and values that may affect gender inequalities indirectly. This includes not only policies that focus directly on family and care but also more general measures relating to income maintenance, poverty reduction and labour market regulation. Depending on the purposes, design and implementation of such policies, they have the potential to undermine or alternatively reinforce gendered norms and/or inequalities.

[Olivetti and Petrongolo \(2017\)](#) argue that the contribution of the expansion of 'family policies' to what they call gender convergence is negligible. However, such policies can have widely differing aims ([Bennett 2017](#)): promoting child development, increasing fertility etc., as well as achieving gender equality. The catch-all phrase 'family policies' may therefore be less than helpful.

Supportive policies have been found to help low-educated women in particular ([Harkness 2018](#)). But some work-family balance policies aim solely to enable women to combine caring with employment ([OECD 2011](#), p. 36). In addition, some 'family policies' in practice subsidize one-earner families, potentially exacerbating gender inequalities in the labour market ([Bennett 2002](#)), as well as family poverty ([Cribb et al. 2017](#)). This danger dogs the design of Universal Credit, which openly prioritizes getting one earner in families into work. This may help lone parents, though the 'sweet spot' (the best return on additional working hours) is lower

¹³ The National Equality Panel ([Hills 2010](#)) included Income Support and Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance in net individual income, even if these were claimed for a couple, but excluded Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit; this is now harder, given the all-in-one nature of Universal Credit.

than in the 'legacy' system (Finch and Gardiner 2018). But we have simultaneously 'baked in' features in the Universal Credit system that provide less incentive to 'second earners' in couples.¹⁴ Alongside payment of childcare costs upfront for most, and insecurity caused by fluctuating monthly payments, this may mean women giving up jobs (Griffiths et al. 2020). The then government said that this policy bias gave families greater choice of work-life balance—clearly seeing this not as an individual but as a family issue. The policy bias in favour of single earners within Universal Credit should be reversed, and tackling the disincentives for 'second earners' in couples to enter employment and to progress should be a policy priority.

Policy analysis and policy detail are crucial; for example, how many hours of free or affordable childcare are sufficient to counter the demands of multiple journeys (above), or other barriers to employment, for women in particular.¹⁵ 'Cash for care' schemes, with low state benefits and no right of return to employment, can lead to longer-term labour market exit by mothers (Bennett 2017). The context is also critical. Concerns about differential access to paid leave have intensified with rising labour market insecurities and increased self-employment, with disproportionate impacts on women (O'Brien 2020). The UK's unpaid parental leave following maternity leave has been highlighted in the pandemic, with parents having to homeschool their children and mothers in particular refused furlough to do so (TUC 2021).

For the International Leave Network, comparing leave policies in over 40 countries (Moss and Deven 2020), the key issue is the gap between well-paid leave (two-thirds, or more, of earnings) and childcare entitlement. UK maternity leave is long but badly paid (except for six weeks), and paternity leave is short. Whilst 'shared parental leave' is available, the need for fathers to share maternity leave and the low pay mean only a very low proportion take this up (Moss and Deven 2020). High take-up by men requires well-paid, father-only leave. And two-thirds of those surveyed for the *Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy* (2020) thought men should be encouraged and financially supported to provide more care. Improvements to employment rights should include reforms to the UK's less than generous parental leave system, which needs to incorporate well-paid leave for the father or other coparent only ('use it or lose it') in order to encourage changes in the gendered division of labour and the sharing of care.

Childcare costs are often offset against the mother's wages in decision-making about her return to employment, and she may also pay them. The exclusion of childcare costs in low-income statistics makes many earners look better off than they are (Bennett and Daly 2014). And when employment is particularly costly (e.g. for lone parents), this has been found to be related to low income over a lifetime (Brewer et al. 2012).

Childcare provision has been significantly expanded recently, especially free entitlement for children who are 3 and 4 years old.¹⁶ But both the upfront payment of childcare costs in Universal Credit and the 'tax exempt' childcare subsidy were policy errors. (In the Spring Budget 2023, the Chancellor announced that parents on Universal Credit entering work or increasing their hours could have an up-front first payment for childcare costs, which

would subsequently be ignored in calculating their benefit.)¹⁷ The limiting of the additional free 15 hours for children who are 3 and 4 years old to certain parents in employment was another, as was dismantling Sure Start centres (Bradshaw and Bennett 2017). The problems with childcare costs created by the monthly assessment and payment in arrears of Universal Credit would most easily be achieved by removing childcare costs from Universal Credit entirely. Instead, as much childcare as possible should be free; if not free, it should be affordable, with subsidies to providers rather than to parents. But any improvements for low-income families should not be paid for just by other parents by reducing other support for childcare.

It is not only targeted policies that are relevant to gender inequalities but also, as discussed above, a wider range of more general policies, including on statutory minimum wages, as well as equal pay for work of equal value and direct and indirect discrimination. According to Skinner (2005), policymakers should also address the time and space dimensions of coordination for parents, transport issues and the need for integrated early years provision in all neighbourhoods. Whilst our means-tested benefits system is much more significant in relation to 'second earner' disincentives, the transferable tax allowance in principle also reduces the incentive for a partner in a couple (married or in a civil partnership) to enter employment when there is already a 'primary earner' (WBG 2013). It does so by giving additional income to the partner already in the labour market or earning more. This was another policy move in the wrong direction with regard to gender equality, having been introduced as a symbol to 'recognize marriage' (and in practice also civil partnership), and should be abolished.

Conclusion

The policy suggestions highlighted above are intended as pointers to a needful change in direction, rather than a comprehensive programme for change, and cover as priorities the issues addressed in this commentary in particular. They do bear out, however, the earlier observation that policy analysis and policy detail are crucial, and this may be a specific contribution that can be made by a social policy perspective on gender inequalities.

The *Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy* (2020) redefines care as a social rather than private issue, and places it at the centre of reimagining the economy. At the launch of its report, the chair said that the time is right for going beyond closing the gender pay gap to look at the economy as a whole, including the unpaid economy; and to move away from a focus on growth, and women wanting to break the glass ceiling, towards a better life for all. There is strong public support for such an agenda. And the combination of a focus on autonomy and agency for all with awareness of our interdependence as a society and wider world means that gender issues must be central to the Deaton Review, not just for their own sake but also in a broader context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Lucinda Platt for constructive comments on a draft of this commentary, which is written in a personal capacity.

¹⁴ Torsten Bell, Resolution Foundation, in oral evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, 18 November 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1243/pdf/>.

¹⁵ See oral evidence by Monica Costa Dias to the Women and Equalities Committee, 14 October 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1079/pdf/>.

¹⁶ And some disadvantaged 2-year-olds. Early years provision is devolved and varies somewhat within the UK.

¹⁷ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spring-budget-2023-labour-market-factsheet/spring-budget-2023-factsheet-labour-market-measures> (15 March 2023); the entitlement to free childcare provision will also be expanded over the next few years and the maximum limits for help with childcare costs in Universal Credit will be increased.

FUNDING

This commentary was written for the IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities, funded by the Nuffield Foundation (grant reference WEL/43603). The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the Foundation.

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