

## **Women and Public Policy, Post-Neoliberalism? A UK perspective**

*Paper prepared for the workshop 'Women and public policy, post neo-liberalism? A study of continuity and change?'*

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*Ruth Lister, Professor of Social Policy, Loughborough University, UK  
(M.R.Lister@lboro.ac.uk).*

Like Canada, the UK has been characterized as a 'post-neoliberal' (or post-Thatcherite) 'social investment state'. This paper will begin by setting the scene with an overview of New Labour's politics and the nature of the emergent 'social investment state'. It will then look more specifically at the implications for women of New Labour's approach to politics and policy-making. This will, in turn, consider governance issues and policies for women as women and women as mothers (or mother-workers). The conclusion reached is equivocal, suggesting a story of both 'continuity and change'.

### **Setting the scene: a post-neoliberal 'social investment state'?**

One of the first serious analyses of New Labour characterized it as 'an exercise in *post-Thatcherite* politics', shaped by Thatcherism yet also a reaction against it (Driver and Martell, 1998: 1, emphasis in original). It is in its embrace of the market that New Labour is most clearly shaped by Thatcherism and has attracted the label 'a *particular variant* of free-market neo-liberalism by commentators on the Left (Hall, 2003: 12, emphasis in original; Gilbert, 2004). In his attempt to 'make sense of New Labour', Alan Finlayson argues that economic relations and economic productivity enjoy 'a privileged space'; New Labour 'embraces the conjoining of all areas of social life with economic productivity, making this a central part of its philosophy alongside the belief that it can square the circle of profitability and equality' (2003: 155). The market rules in the face of the imperatives of global competitiveness and change in what Bob Jessop dubbed the post-fordist 'Schumpeterian workfare state' (1994, 2000; see also Holden, 1999). The market also provides the template for the reform of welfare services in the name of consumer choice.

Finlayson cites Arestis and Sawyer's characterization of New Labour's economic policy as 'neo-liberalism with a human face' (Arestis and Sawyer, 2001: 275; see also Crouch, 2001). The human face represents the reaction *against* neo-liberal Thatcherism. Although Stuart Hall dismisses the 'subordinate' social democratic strand in 'New Labour's double-shuffle' as simply 'the necessary "cost" of maintaining loyalty among its traditional supporters' (2003: 19), I would argue that there are elements within it which reflect more traditional social democratic motivations and which represent building blocks in the emergent post-neo-liberal 'social investment state'.

In the same way that Hall characterizes New Labour as a 'hybrid' political/economic regime so the 'social investment state' represents a hybrid welfare regime, combining elements of liberal and social –democratic welfare regimes (Lister, 2004). Unprecedented levels of investment in children and a commitment to eradicate child poverty provide the main contours of the 'human face' of post-neoliberal economic and marketization policies.

However, rather than standing in tension with those policies they reinforce them in the future-oriented emphasis placed on investment in human capital. Children may be the emblems of the 'social investment state' but they are so primarily as citizen-workers of the future rather than as children in the here and now (Lister, 2003, 2004, 2006; see also Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2003; Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2005). Whereas in the social democratic welfare state, the prominent discourse is about protection 'from the market', the 'social investment state' seeks to facilitate the integration of people into the market' (Featherstone, 2004: 97). Social policy performs an instrumentalist function in the service of the economy and this shapes policies towards women as well as children.

### **Women in government**

New Labour came to power with a commitment to create a minister for women with cabinet rank, thanks to the earlier campaigning of women MPs, notably the late Jo Richardson. In fact at cabinet level the post has always been held by a Minister who has another, more prominent, portfolio and it has often seemed like a marginal afterthought when posts were reshuffled. This impression is heightened by the fact that twice the post of minister for women below cabinet level has been held on an unpaid basis, signalling the low value accorded to women's issues. Instead of the Ministry for Women, originally anticipated, Tony Blair established a new Women's Unit (since named the Women and Equality Unit) and signalled its relatively marginal status by locating it away from the central levers of power and then moving it between government departments until it finally rested in the Department of Trade and Industry. The longer established, independent Equal Opportunities Commission is to be amalgamated with the Commission for Race Equality (CRE) and Disability Rights Commission in a Commission for Equality and Human Rights. This is a move which most commentators welcome but it is being preceded by a 10 per cent cut in the EOC's budget, leaving it with a budget of roughly half those of the other two commissions (Ashley, 2006).

In addition to these institutional mechanisms, Tony Blair established a Women and Work Commission in 2004 with a specific, time-limited, remit to look at the 'wide-ranging influences on the gender pay gap' and to make recommendations to the Prime Minister, 'taking note of the importance of promoting employability, the wider benefits to the economy and the impact on employers and public expenditure' (Women and Work Commission, 2006: 127; see also below). The following year Trevor Phillips, Chair of the CRE, was charged with responsibility for an Equalities Review 'to investigate the causes of persistent discrimination and inequality'.<sup>1</sup> The review panel was invited 'to consider especially those areas of inequality which are not the product of pure economic disadvantage' (Phillips, 2006: 3). 'Mainstreaming' has been promoted through a Gender Equality Public Service Agreement, established in 2002, which set targets covering employment, pay, flexible working, childcare and domestic violence.<sup>2</sup> More recently, the government has committed itself to a Gender Equality Duty on public bodies, although later than the imposition of similar duties in the areas of 'race' and disability.<sup>3</sup>

When it came to power, New Labour was keen to promote a feminine, if not a feminist, image to appeal to the women voters who increasingly have been targeted as key to electoral success.<sup>4</sup> While feminism was seen to represent 'yesterday's politics' (Coote, 2000: 3), a more feminine face (to be achieved by all-women shortlists in about half of key 'winnable' seats) was part of the party's modernizing image.<sup>5</sup> Much was made of the 101 New Labour women MPs elected in 1979 – 'Blair's babes' – although opinions are divided as to how much difference they have made to policy. A fair assessment would probably be that they have made some difference (see Mactaggart, 2000) although, at only a fifth of all MPs (and with only two Black women MPs), women do not yet represent a critical mass in the Westminster Parliament and certainly do not represent women in their diversity. In the devolved elected bodies in Scotland and Wales they do constitute such a mass (although not a diverse one) and one verdict is that they have been more successful there 'in challenging the male policy agenda bias' (Squires and Wickham-Jones, 2001: 110; see also Dobrowolsky, 2002).

### **Women *qua* women: 'a politics for women without [big F] feminism'.**

Although feminism has been treated as the unmentionable 'f' word by the Blair government, there are senior women within it who still identify themselves as feminists, even if for much of the time they operate as closet feminists. According to one journalist, 'there is an influential alliance of women, largely unrecognised, at the top and middle of government which is deadly serious about a core feminist agenda – greater moves towards equal pay, more women in public life, more childcare and so on' (Benn, 2003). She identified Patricia Hewitt, then Minister for Women and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, as 'at the heart of this alliance'.

In an unusual and interesting intervention, Hewitt hosted and participated in a roundtable discussion on feminism for the political journal *Renewal* (Hewitt et al., 2004). In her contribution she distinguished between 'big F feminism', which, she suggested, 'seems to have little resonance today', and 'small f feminism [which] seems to be alive and well' (ibid: 15-16; see also Lister, 2005; Dobrowolsky with Lister, forthcoming). She acknowledged that New Labour was 'undoubtedly uncomfortable with defining itself or having its leaders define themselves as big F feminists', suggesting that was hardly surprising given its identification in Opposition with 'minorities of all kinds' (ibid: 24). Nevertheless, she said that she would want to defend her government's record on a number of fronts important to women. As we will see, she has grounds – up to a point – in doing so. The progress made is, though, the product of 'a politics for women without feminism' (McRobbie, 2000: 99) at least in its big F sense. Policies are directed at particular groups of women with particular problems without addressing wider patterns of inequality, thereby eliding underlying gendered structures and processes (Bacchi, 1999; Walter, 2006).

By 'small f feminism' Hewitt meant 'a gendered view of the world and an understanding of the continual inequalities that affect and distort the lives of women and also the lives of men' (ibid: 16). However, one of the frequent criticisms of New Labour is that it lacks a systemic gendered analysis of this

kind. For example in a letter to *the Guardian*, Vivienne Hayes, director of the Women's Resource Centre, warned that the new gender equality duty could prove nothing more than 'a tick-box exercise' because the consultation document on it 'does not acknowledge historical institutional discrimination and abuse against women' (21 November, 2005).<sup>6</sup>

This is symptomatic of a broader shift in which 'a political critique of structural inequalities in society has been lost' and in which 'antagonisms between capital and labour, men and women, rich and poor, black and white no longer, in the view of the "new politics", hold the key to social change' (Franklin, 2000: 17). New Labour is uncomfortable 'with any kind of systemic intervention to tackle entrenched patterns of advantage and disadvantage, such as those that sustain unequal power relations between women and men, and unequal pay' (Coote, 2001: 128-9). Equality of opportunity has replaced equality as a guiding value (Lister, 2006b). Even the announcement of the Equalities Review, which suggested greater acknowledgement of underlying inequalities, was couched in the language of opportunities.

New Labour is similarly uncomfortable with interventions that challenge business, a reflection of its post-neoliberal priorities. Both workplace policies for women *qua* women and work-family reconciliation policies for women *qua* mothers tend to be filtered through 'a business lens' (Pascall, 2006). Policies must not 'burden business' even if it means inadequate support for women who continue to bear a heavy burden, struggling to juggle family responsibilities and paid work in an unequal labour market. At EU level too, the domination of neo-liberal tenets means that 'the business case' rather than gender equality as such is typically 'the dominant frame into which arguments for gender equality must "fit"' (Lewis, 2006: 426; see also Stratigaki, 2004).

#### *Women in the labour market*

The 'business lens' has acted as a brake on the measures the government has been willing to take to improve women's labour market position. Women's labour market participation has continued to rise under New Labour, although (apart from measures targeted specifically at lone mothers on social assistance and possibly the success of an Ethnic Minority Outreach programme in reaching in particular Indian and Pakistani married women) this appears to be more the continuation of a trend than the result of any new policies (Pascall, 2006). At 70 per cent in 2004, women's labour market participation is well above the European Union average (Bellamy and Rake, 2005).

However, there is considerable variation between ethnic groups, with participation highest among White and Black Caribbean women and particularly low among Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. Furthermore, 45 per cent of women are in part-time jobs and this is a major contributory factor in their disadvantaged labour market position. The combination of high female labour market participation and part-time work means that the UK can be described as fitting a 'one and a half adult worker model' (Lewis, 2000). The government is using social security policy to encourage women's labour

market participation through the introduction of 'joint claims' for childless couples on social assistance, which means both partners now have to be available for and actively seeking work (for a discussion, see Bennett, 2005).

As well as women's labour market participation, the gender pay gap is also well above the EU average and is one of the widest in Europe. The mean full-time gender pay gap did fall by three percentage points between 1998 and 2004 from 20 to 17 per cent but the gap between women working part-time and men full-time remained stuck at 41 per cent (Bellamy and Rake, 2005). The pay gap generally is largest for Indian, Black African, White and Pakistani and Bangladeshi women (Brittain et al., 2005). The reduction in the full-time pay gap is partly due to the introduction and subsequent up-rating of the minimum wage, two thirds of the recipients of which are women (DWP, 2005). The introduction of the minimum wage was one of the few examples where New Labour has been willing to face down employers' interests, although the low level at which it was set was in part an attempt to placate business opposition to the policy.

The persistence of the pay gap, together with occupational segregation (horizontal and vertical) has been the subject of some recent public comment three decades since the implementation of the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts. A few commentators have raised the issue of the low value accorded to women's work, particularly caring work. While the wider issue of the value accorded to different kinds of work has not been taken up by the Government, it has established a Children's Workforce Development Council and has asked it to report on the impact of reward packages on recruitment and retention (0-19, March 2006).

There is wide support for compulsory pay audits as a means of tackling the gender pay gap but this policy has been resisted by the government in the face of business opposition. Instead it has promoted voluntary equal pay reviews and has set a Public Service Agreement target of 45 per cent of large organizations having completed equal pay reviews by 2008 (Women & Work Commission, 2006). According to the EOC (u.d.), in 2004 two thirds of companies had no plans to carry out a review, the same proportion as in the two previous years.

The Women and Work Commission established by Blair was asked to look at the case for making equal pay reviews mandatory (as had been advocated by many organizations including the EOC). However, to the consternation of many commentators, the Commission, which reported February 2006, was unable to reach agreement on this issue in the face of strong opposition from business. Instead its recommendations were directed more towards education and training than the workplace as such and had the ring of blaming women themselves for not aiming higher (Toynbee, 2006). In addition it called for pilot projects to tackle occupational segregation and unequal pay in the private sector and for the new public sector gender equality duty explicitly to address 'all causes of the gender pay gap' (Women & Work Commission, 2006: xv). In response, the government has committed itself to an action plan by Autumn 2006 and the Commission will be

reconvened a year after it reported to comment on the effectiveness of the action taken.

The approach to promoting women's political citizenship through parliament and other public bodies has also been permissive rather than mandatory: an amendment to the Sex Discrimination Act to allow positive discrimination in the selection of parliamentary candidates until 2015 and targets (not quotas) for women's representation on public bodies of 45 to 50 per cent by the end of 2005. The actual proportion was 35 per cent, marginally lower than in 2003 (EOC, 2006) and black and minority ethnic women still hold no more than two per cent of appointments to Non-Departmental Public Bodies (Brittain et al., 2005). Overall, the EOC's sex and power index, established in 2003, records 'some progress in certain areas but generally little change' (EOC, 2006: 1).

Women's disadvantaged labour market position translates into inferior pensions and often poverty in older age. Pensions policy is one of the few areas where, under pressure, the government has produced a comprehensive gender analysis.<sup>7</sup> 'Achieving fair outcomes for women and carers is one of the Government's principles for pension reform and will be one of the key factors on which proposals for reform will be judged' (DWP, 2005: 106). Although the government is able to point to the ways in which specific pensions measures it has already taken have benefited women, in the long term the overall shift in emphasis towards means-testing and private, market-based, provision is 'problematic for women' (Bennett, 2005: 48).

### *Violence against women*

Violence against women is one issue affecting a broad range of women that the government has taken up. In 2005 it published a report on domestic violence, which set out a number of cross-cutting commitments aimed at preventing and responding to domestic violence, including implementation of new legislation and the expansion of specialist domestic violence courts.<sup>8</sup> It has also introduced the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which named a number of new sexual offences and clarified the law on consent, and is implementing a Rape Action Plan to improve the investigation and prosecution of rape cases. It has also taken action against forced marriages, with a dedicated forced marriage unit. The Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act was hailed as a 'feminist act', intervening in power relations in the private realm, but one which is 'an exception that proves the rule' in a government reluctant to embrace large F feminism (Benn, 2004). It reflected years of feminist work on the issue particularly at local authority level (Campbell in Hewitt et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, the newly formed End Violence against Women Coalition has criticized the steps taken on all forms of violence against women as 'piecemeal', not informed by 'integrated thinking' and many of them lacking 'budgets, timelines or monitoring systems' (Kalcher, 2006: 8). An investigation by the Coalition of the actions taken by government departments awarded them just one out of ten overall, with 'six departments scoring zero...and none more than 3.5' (ibid.: 9). It is now calling for a joined-up, integrated and properly funded strategy across all departments.

### **Women *qua* mothers (or mother-workers) in the 'social investment state'**

Prior to the 2005 general election, the Fawcett Society, the leading campaigning group on gender equality, complained that these broader gender equality issues were largely ignored by politicians who tended to equate women with mothers when wooing the 'women's vote'. This mirrors concerns voiced in the context of Canadian social investment policies. Jenson and Saint-Martin (2001) have warned that neglect of gender equality issues may be one consequence of the future-oriented 'social investment state'.

According to Jane Jenson, 'questions of gender power...are more and more difficult to raise, as adults are left to take responsibility for their own lives' (2001: 125). Women do play an important role in the 'social investment state' – more so than men given women's continued association with children – but it is as *mothers* of the citizen-workers of the future and, increasingly as *mother-workers* whose responsibility as citizens spans the workplace and the family. Some children are not, however, seen as good investments; witness for instance the treatment of asylum-seeking children and mothers (Lister, 2006a; Dobrowolsky with Lister, forthcoming).

#### *Childcare*

Thus in terms of gender equality, the policy area where the government has made the greatest difference – even if there is still a long way to go – is paid work-family reconciliation i.e. policies that enable mothers to fulfil those dual sets of responsibilities. Prior to New Labour coming to power, childcare had been treated as a private responsibility by government (other than for vulnerable children). Thanks partly to pressure from women in the government, the Chancellor of the Exchequer made childcare an early economic and social priority. This led to a more comprehensive cross-departmental childcare strategy, which was published in December 2004.

The document spells out the rationale for the government's role in childcare with reference to fairness and economic prosperity as well as the failures of the market. It argues that as "children are the citizens, workers, parents and leaders of the future", "it is in everyone's interests that children are given the opportunity to fulfil their potential" (HM Treasury, 2004: 7); this investment "is money well spent and it will reduce the costs of social failure" (ibid: 7). The report spells out the progress made so far but identifies continuing problems of availability, affordability, quality and flexibility.

The strategy promises to 'deliver universal affordable childcare for 3 to 14 year olds, and a Sure Start Children's Centre for every community in England, so early years and childcare services become a permanent, mainstream part of the welfare state' (DWP, 2005: 14).<sup>9</sup> The provisions will include longer part-time nursery places for all three and four year olds and a further increase in the number of out-of-school clubs for older children. New legislation will place a legal duty on local authorities to ensure that there is sufficient childcare to meet the needs of working families, particularly those on low incomes, and families with disabled children in their area. However, local authorities' role is primarily that of 'market facilitator' rather than provider in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors (Daycare Trust, 2005: 1). Government investment is mainly on the demand side through childcare tax

credits, which now meet up to 80 per cent of childcare costs within fixed maximum cost limits graded according to whether there is one or two or more children using the childcare.

The government has so far been successful in achieving its targets for increased provision but most childcare experts believe that it should be investing more in the supply side of provision itself rather than in the demand side of tax credits. 'This is because in funding the demand for childcare provision they [tax credits] have stimulated the growth of low-waged care in the private sector. Nor do they provide parents with scope to demand better quality provision; they can lead to inflation of childcare costs, and they do not constitute a secure funding source for providers' (Williams, 2005: 292). The independent Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty has pointed also to the 'considerable problems in matching accessible supply and demand'. It too has called for a re-balancing of support towards direct investment in high quality child care places and has emphasised the need to ensure different types of provision 'especially for parents with disabled children, who have particular needs and requirements, and minority ethnic groups who have traditionally made less use of formal, centre-based childcare than other groups' (Fabian Commission, 2006: 177). The OECD, while acknowledging that spending on childcare has more than doubled, argues that access to affordable, quality childcare remains problematic and therefore calls for further investment (OECD, 2005).

#### *Maternity/paternity/parental leave and working time*

As well as a strategy for childcare, New Labour has introduced a series of measures to improve leave provisions for mothers (and to a lesser extent fathers) who want to care for young children at home. Maternity leave has been extended to a year and it is now proposed to extend maternity pay from six to nine months in 2007, with an eventual goal of 12 months. On coming to power, the government overturned the Conservatives' refusal to sign up to the EU parental leave directive, but introduced parental leave and time off for family reasons on an unpaid basis.

Attempts to encourage fathers to take leave have been timid. Fathers are now entitled to two weeks paternity leave on statutory paternity pay paid at a low flat rate. It is now proposed to allow fathers a maximum of six months' 'additional paternity leave' (APL), the first three months of which would be paid at the same low flat rate as the existing paternity leave. However, a father will only be eligible for APL if the mother goes back to work; and entitlement to paid APL will depend on her entitlement to statutory maternity pay or maternity allowance. This is an improvement on the original proposal to allow mothers to transfer part of their *maternity* leave to fathers. However, it still does not give fathers an independent right and, as campaigners have pointed out, APL will only represent a meaningful option for most fathers, if it is paid at a reasonable rate. It is therefore unsurprising that the government has estimated that only 1.3 to 2.4 per cent of new fathers will take up the APL (*Guardian*, 20 October 2005). Despite beginning to talk about the need for greater paternal involvement in childcare, and a discourse of shared responsibility at EU level, ministers have refused to consider the model

pioneered by the Nordic states of a period of parental leave reserved for fathers. And instead of introducing paid *parental* leave (which is at least gender-neutral in nomenclature even if not in effect) it has gone down the idiosyncratic path of extended *maternity* leave (with token paternity leave).

The reluctance to use policy to change behaviour in the 'private' sphere of the family and interfere with 'individual choice' contrasts with New Labour's willingness to do so where that behaviour has more obvious 'public' consequences (Deacon, 2002). Yet, as the State Secretary in the Swedish Finance Ministry argues, it is 'implausible' to treat decisions as to who cares for children in the family as purely 'private' 'when the choice is almost always that the mother is going to remain at home. It is a structural problem, and progressive politics has an obligation to fight old-fashioned structures' (Andersson, 2005: 175-6). The refusal to do so means the dominance of the 'universal breadwinner' model (which has replaced the previous 'male breadwinner' model) without any real attempt to move towards a 'universal care-giver' model in which men combine paid work and family responsibilities in the same way that women do (Fraser, 1997).

Working time policies are in the same mould. The significance of working time for gender equality has been recognised more in other European countries such as the Netherlands. In the UK a report for the Equal Opportunities Commission, over a decade ago, observed that regulation of the hours of paid work undertaken by men might be the single most effective way of promoting equality (Marsh, 1991). Yet, the UK negotiated an opt-out to the EU Working Time Directive, which allows workers to choose to work longer than the 48 hour week maximum. The result is that male workers work the longest hours in the EU. Rather than giving parents of young children a right to work shorter hours (as in Sweden), the government introduced the right of parents with children aged under 6 to *request* flexible hours and imposed on employers a duty 'to consider requests seriously' (HM Treasury and DTI, 2003: 24). In its first year around a quarter of entitled parents used this right and around eight out of nine who asked were granted it fully or partially (Women & Equality Unit, 2005). It is now proposed to extend the right to parents of older children and to those caring for adults.

Leave and working time policies bear the clear finger-prints of the business lobby. The 'business case' consistently trumps the 'gender equality' case. This was reflected in the title of the first consultation paper on the issue: *Working Parents: competitiveness and choice*. Gender equality was not even listed as one of the objectives and the case for paid parental leave was dismissed with reference to employers' views. Similarly, although gender equality is at least mentioned, in the most recent consultation paper, *Work and Families: Choice and Flexibility*, it is more of a footnote than a frame (Pascall, 2006). A consultation paper on working time made the case for preserving the opt-out from the EU directive on two grounds: 'preserving labour market flexibility' and 'individual choice' (DTI, 2004: 11, cited in Pascall, 2006). As Gillian Pascall observes, rather than using the Working Time Directive as a tool for promoting work-rest of life balance, the government prioritizes the business case for labour market flexibility and deploys a

discourse of individual choice which in effect 'reduces choice for those who take responsibility for care' (2006). Here is a clear example of where potentially progressive social policies are being shaped by post-neoliberal priorities so that their impact is diluted.

*Lone mothers, work obligations and parental responsibilities*

Neo-liberalism is one of a number of influences behind the prioritization given by New Labour to paid work as the key citizenship obligation (Lister, 2002). Paid work is regarded as the best route out of poverty, not least for lone parents. Policies towards lone parents started disastrously with the acceptance of the previous Conservative government's plan to abolish the modest additional benefit paid to lone parents. This provoked an outcry both inside and outside parliament and was followed by a series of improvements in benefits paid to children (a one off real increase in the universal child benefit – but for the first child only – and annual improvements in the social assistance allowances for children such that they had doubled in real terms for children aged under 11 by the end of New Labour's second term in office).

The main driver in policy towards lone parents has been to encourage them 'to move from benefit dependency into active participation in the labour market' (DWP, 2005: 95).<sup>10</sup> This has been relatively successful, with a 11.3 percentage point increase in the lone parent employment rate since 1997 to 56.6 per cent, the highest on record, and a 28.7 percentage point fall in the employment gap between lone parents and the overall population since the mid-1990s (DWP, 2005). However, the rate is still low compared to the 72 per cent rate among partnered mothers and to the lone parent rate in other countries.

The main initial policy instrument was the New Deal for Lone Parents, one of a number of welfare-to-work policies introduced when New Labour came to power. Unlike some of the other New Deal schemes, that for lone parents is voluntary (as is the New Deal for Partners) and it has been pointed out that investment in New Deal schemes with a largely female clientele has been considerably lower than that in those with mainly male participants (Rake, 2001; Bennett, 2005). In addition to the voluntary New Deal, lone parents (and others) are now required to attend increasingly frequent mandatory 'work-focused interviews', which appear to be having a largely positive impact in terms of increasing self-confidence and motivation. Although the interviews are compulsory, the UK remains unusual in not requiring lone parents to be available for paid work until their youngest child is aged 16. Nevertheless, the perception is of considerable pressure on lone mothers to become citizen-workers as well as carers.

At the same time, there is growing emphasis on parental (read maternal) responsibility for the behaviour and education of their children, backed up with increasingly authoritarian policies (Fawcett et al., 2004; Lister, 2006a). These include compulsory Parenting Orders, fines or even jail for parents in cases of persistent child truancy and, as part of the new Respect agenda, 'a new offence for parents where an excluded pupil is found unsupervised in a public place during normal school hours without reasonable excuse' (Respect Task

Force, 2006: 15).. Such policies aim to ensure that investment in children pays off in terms of promoting social cohesion and turning children and young people into responsible adult citizens. Social policy is to be used to encourage and, if necessary, enforce the responsibility of parents 'to bring up children as competent, responsible citizens' (Blair, 1998: 12). While support services for parents are also being developed, these are less prominent than the enforcement of parental responsibilities.

The gendered implications of these policies are underlined by Scourfield and Drakeford: 'while governments may talk of "parents", the impact of policies that impose home-school agreements, fine the parents of truants or require the parents of children appearing before the courts to attend parenting classes falls quite disproportionately upon mothers, not fathers' (2002: 627; see also Gillies, 2005, Featherstone, 2006; Lister, 2006a). Many of these are the same mothers whose responsibility to take paid work is also being emphasized, potentially placing greater strain on lone mothers in particular (Standing, 1999; Horgan, 2005).

### *Tackling poverty*

Welfare-to-work policies are supported with policies designed 'to make work pay' through a new working tax credits scheme. This complements child tax credits, which play a central role in the anti-child poverty strategy. The government was forced to back down in its earlier attempt to pay the first generation of tax credits (which replaced a means-tested in-work benefit paid to mothers) through the pay packet and subsequently accepted the case for paying credits for children to the caring parent. The gender implications of tax credits are mixed. On the one hand they have increased the financial support available to low income mothers and workers – involving a transfer of around £2billion from men to women/mothers – and in a small number of cases could encourage a more equal sharing of care and paid work<sup>11</sup>; on the other hand they are seen as a threat to independent taxation and as a potential disincentive to 'second earners' (Bennett, 2005; Bellamy et al., 2006).

The gender dimension of poverty tends to be overlooked in public debate (Bradshaw et al., 2003). The child poverty strategy has been criticized for its failure to address the links between women's and children's poverty. Even when the Department for Work and Pensions devoted a chapter to women in its 2005 annual *Opportunities for All* report, which had previously virtually ignored women, it lacked any real analysis of the nature of women's poverty and its links with child poverty.<sup>12</sup> The Women's Budget Group (WBG) has detailed the nature of these links, which stem from women's role as the main carers of children and main managers of poverty on the one hand and from the interrelationship between women's weak labour market position and child poverty on the other (WBG, 2005). The WBG report's central message is that 'tackling women's poverty is critical to the long-term success of the Government's child poverty strategy as well as being important in its own right' (WBG, 2005: v).

The reference to the importance of women's poverty in its own right was an attempt to prevent the elision of the impact of poverty on women themselves

behind the focus on child poverty. The WBG made a strategic choice to highlight the links between women's and children's poverty as a way of getting women's poverty on to the government's poverty agenda. But it was aware of the dangers in doing so. Canadian experience has shown how the understandable prioritization of child poverty can lead to the displacement of women's issues generally and women's poverty specifically, rather than making the connections between them (Stasiulis, 2002; Wiegers, 2002; Dobrowolsky, 2004; Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004; Morrow et al., 2004).

It is difficult to assess the impact of New Labour's policies on women's poverty because of the inadequacy of the statistics, which are unable to take account of how resources are shared within households. On the face of it, women remain at a slightly higher risk than men of living in low income households. As mothers – particularly lone mothers – they will have benefited from the reduction in child poverty of 700,000 (although that was below the target of a one million reduction by 2004-05 that the government had set itself). Poverty among childless adults has increased. Some groups not identified in the statistics, such as asylum-seekers and refugees, are known to be suffering considerable poverty (Fitzpatrick, 2005).

Inequality, which had risen to historically high post-war levels, remains roughly at the same level as when New Labour came to power, although the general consensus is that, without its tax-benefit policies, inequality would be even higher (Hills and Stewart, 2005; Sefton, 2005, Brewer et al., 2006). Earnings inequality is largely responsible for high income inequality. However, whereas between the late 1970s and mid-1990s the dispersion widened across the whole income distribution, since then the position of low income men and women relative to middle income-earners has kept up or even improved; this is only partly attributed to the introduction of the minimum wage (Sefton and Sutherland, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

The impact of New Labour's policies for and on women has been mixed. If one were to draw up a detailed balance sheet, the balance would no doubt be on the credit rather than the debit side. The overall conclusion of a Fawcett Society analysis of changes in women's economic position under New Labour is that the lives of many women have 'undoubtedly improved', particularly as a result of anti-poverty and work-rest-of-life balance policies. However, 'until these policies are guided by an over-arching aim of gender equality they will fail to tackle the underlying causes of women's inferior economic position' and the government 'will not achieve lasting change or close the gender gaps for all women unless it seeks to transform gender relations' (Bellamy and Rake, 2005: 56-7).

Gender equality and the transformation of gender relations have not been primary policy goals. Insofar as feminism and feminists have influenced policy within government, it has been feminism with a small 'f'. To the extent that gender equality has informed policy, it has been subordinated to post-neoliberal, free market goals such as international competitiveness, light regulation of business and individual choice for consumer-citizens. A similar

subservience of gender equality to neo-liberal economic goals can be discerned at EU level (Lewis, 2006). Finally, in the 'social investment state' investment in children as human capital and the elevation of paid work as the foremost citizenship obligation take priority. It is a case of business (not women) and children first (Lister, 2006a).

References to be added.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.theequalitiesreview.org.uk/background/index.asp](http://www.theequalitiesreview.org.uk/background/index.asp).

<sup>2</sup> For a critical analysis of the limitations of gender mainstreaming in the context of neo-liberal economic policies see Perron (2005).

<sup>3</sup> The Gender Equality Duty will require public bodies to eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote equality of opportunity between women and men, which shifts the onus of proof from individuals to public bodies.

<sup>4</sup> David Cameron, new leader of the Conservative Party, has taken this message on board and is pushing the selection of female candidates in winnable seats (Ashley, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> However, in the run-up to the 2005 Election, it was reported that senior Labour women would be sidelined in the election campaign on the grounds that they were too 'posh' to appeal to working class women (*The Observer*, 6 February, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The letter was in a response to an article, marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sex Discrimination Act, by Beatrix Campbell, who was highly critical of New Labour's failure to update the legislation in the face of continued gender discrimination.

<sup>7</sup> See *Women and Pensions: The Evidence*, published by the Department for Work and Pension, November 2005 ([www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk)).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.crimereduction.gov.uk/domesticviolence51.pdf](http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/domesticviolence51.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Sure Start, partially modelled on the American Head Start programme, is an innovative early years programme designed to support and involve parents, which has been pioneered in disadvantaged areas. By March 2006 there were 836 Sure Start children's centres providing integrated services for around 657,000 children (*House of Commons Hansard*, 18. 4. 2006, cols 2-3WS). There are fears that, when it is rolled out nationally through Children's Centres, there will not be sufficient funding to maintain the quality of provision and the features that have made it very popular among parents.

<sup>10</sup> This use of the neo-liberal discourse of 'dependency' is typical of New Labour.

<sup>11</sup> This is because of a change to the rules, which means that couples can add together their hours of work to qualify for the additional tax credit paid to anyone working 30 hours or more a week.

<sup>12</sup> *Opportunities for All* is an annual report, initiated by New Labour, which monitors progress on reducing poverty and social exclusion. It can be accessed at [www.dwp.gov.uk/ofa](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/ofa).