

# The Persistence in Gendering: Work-Family Policy in Britain since Beveridge

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## Abstract

Understanding the historical policy pathways that have led to the constellation of policies that both reflect and shape the current gender order can reveal reasons for the persistence of gender inequality in paid work and unpaid family care. Bringing together existing research and policy critique with Carol Bacchi's framework of policy as 'gendering practices', this paper focuses on the role of policy as a process that constructs and upholds an unequal gender order. The discussion traces how UK social policies have since the establishment of the post-war welfare state articulated and positioned gendered possibilities for combining paid work and child-rearing, shaping gendered and classed work-family life courses. The analysis illustrates that British social policy has not been consistently committed to a more equal gender regime but instead maintained a heteronormative family ideal and thus, despite various policy changes, the gendering of 'the worker' and 'the parent' as conceptualised in UK policy has persisted over the last several decades.

## Introduction

Policies and regulations related to labour rights, childcare and welfare form the framework within which differently placed individuals come to see what is possible for them in navigating paid work and childrearing. As such, equalities legislation and maternity protections along with policies relating to parental leave, childcare and working time or flexibility are frequent sites of feminist intervention in scholarship and activism. Yet these same policies can also subtly contribute to maintaining the unequal gender order, and understanding the historical policy pathways that have led to the constellation of policies which reflect and shape gender relations is critical to continued attempts to bring about social change through state institutions and policy (Htun and Weldon, 2017). The aim of this article is therefore to make visible some of the ways that progress towards gender equality is held back, despite the formal gender neutrality of much social policy, by showing how policies relating to paid work and family life have articulated and positioned gendered lives over time.

Bringing together existing research and policy critique with a theoretical framework of policy as 'gendering practices' (Bacchi, 2016), the article asks

whether and how the gendering of ‘the worker’ and ‘the parent’, through the normative assumptions and prescriptions policies contain about behaviours in the labour market and in the family, has changed over time. The discussion traces the move from the explicitly gendered arrangement of the initial post-war welfare state when “the *primary* responsibility of men was to earn and of women was to care” (Lewis, 2002a, p. 332) to the current time of ‘formally gender-neutral states’ (Orloff, 2017). I argue that despite a multitude of policy changes over the period, the *gendering* has remained stable. I show that the gendered division of labour persists, contributing to economic inequalities between women and men, because the legacy of separate spheres is reproduced through policy’s commitment to a heteronormative ‘ideal’ family comprising a main earner and a main carer. It follows that attempts to bring about greater gender equality through state legislation and policy will need to work towards dismantling this gender hierarchy.

### **Theoretical framework: State policy as gendering**

I follow a range of feminist scholars who view gender not simply as an individual identity or characteristic, but more broadly as a principle that structures social life through the social conventions and institutional rules that allocate, take for granted or regulate different roles, responsibilities and ‘appropriate behaviours’ for men and women (Risman, 2004; West and Zimmerman, 1987; Young, 2002). Such expectations of ‘appropriate’ gendered behaviours, including but not limited to responsibilities to one’s children, parents and community, are neither uniform nor static. They vary across life stages and also differ by class and race (Collins, 2000; Skeggs, 1997) as gender is produced, reproduced and contested at different levels in society; from the daily mundane interactions between individuals to the institutional level in the form of state regulations, laws, policies and distribution of resources (Risman, 2004; West and Zimmerman, 1987). “Gender is the mechanism through which ‘woman’ and ‘man’ and ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ come to be known as legitimate conceptual categories” (Htun and Weldon, 2017, p. 159), and formal policies, laws and regulations contribute to the maintenance of structures of gender through the normative messages they convey. Yet it is important to note that gender constructs men and women not just as different (and complementary), but as unequal, through the privileging of men and the masculine as the norm (Connell, 1990, 2005; England, 2010; Htun and Weldon, 2017; Young, 2002). For example, a dominant aspect of the structuring mechanism of gender is the view of women and men as complementary and the ideological significance attached to intimate relationships between them. This presumption of heterosexuality, the view of men and women as couples and the nuclear family as the norm, and in turn closely linked with the gendered division of labour stemming from the doctrine of separate spheres, is often (implicitly) reinforced through

state policies such as taxation and benefit rules (Budig, 2004; Crompton, 2006b; Ingraham, 1994; Rich, 1980; Young, 2002). In short, policies not only reflect gender norms, but have a role in upholding and shaping gender relations: they can be thought of as *gendering* practices (Bacchi, 2016).

Carol Bacchi's 'gendering practices' approach shifts attention from policies as having differential impacts on categories of people, such as women and men, to "how [policies] take part in shaping them and their lives through constitutive practices" (Bacchi, 2016, p. 17). This is not to say that the shaping is intentional, or even coherent, nor to suggest that the process is unidirectional or that policy is the sole cause of (gender) inequalities, but rather makes explicit the role of policy as part of the complex ongoing social construction and negotiation of gender. At its core, the approach refutes the central principle of much social policy scholarship that sees policies as separate from the people and social problems they relate to. It asserts that policies contribute to constituting categories of people through what is and is not articulated as a problem to be addressed. This attention to policies as processes of categorisation also draws attention to their intersectional dynamics (Crenshaw, 1991); how assumptions of 'appropriate' behaviour are often implicitly white and middle-class as well as gendered, and thus simultaneously also racializing, classing, heteronorming while gendering. Viewing policy in this way does not deny that policies have direct material effects that can be quite different for women and men, as well as vary by class and race; analysis of differential policy impact remains an important object of feminist study and critique (albeit not the focus in this paper). In previous work, Bacchi (1999, 2009, 2010) has discussed problem representations and how these, through the proposed or enacted policy solutions, create three interconnected effects: "discursive effects (what is discussed and not discussed); subjectification effects (how people are thought about and how they think about themselves); and lived effects (the impact on life and death)" (Bacchi, 2010, p. 4). Analysing policy as a *gendering* process draws attention in particular to how people are thought about; the potential subjectification effects, or what Bacchi in other work has referred to as the creation of people categories (Bacchi, 2009). Further, by analysing policy as *gendering*, rather than as having differential effects on women and men (as if these are stable and coherent pre-existing categories), the approach taken in this paper has the potential to sidestep the equality/difference dichotomy (see e.g. Lister, 1999) that either women must attain equality on male terms or women's unpaid work ought to be accommodated (which risks reifying caregiving as a female responsibility). Neither strategy has to date succeeded in destabilising the gender hierarchy.

### **Analysing policy as gendering practices**

The focus in this article is on how UK labour market and family policies, as framed and/or implemented, constitute subject positions in an ongoing process

of constructing and upholding gender. However, as a range of feminist scholars have highlighted, making this process visible is challenging because of the apparent gender neutrality in much recent policy. While impact analysis techniques may be applied to show how policies impact categories of people differently, to demonstrate policy as a process that upholds the gender order involves identifying patriarchal assumptions and highlighting the androcentric, or gynocentric, models underlying supposedly universal and neutral representations (Bakker, 1994). It requires reflecting on the social and economic inequalities of the contemporaneous context, the composition of the target group of any policy, and teasing out the unspoken assumptions that inscribe the gender order in policy rules (Elson and Warnecke, 2011). Importantly, attending to such silences as well as what is said reveals what is taken for granted, which may present opportunities for challenge and change (Ingraham, 1994), a central goal of much feminist scholarship.

In her article on gendering practices Bacchi (2016) offers limited guidance on the practicalities of applying this lens to policy analysis beyond a recommendation for greater reflexivity in policy scholarship (and policy-making) through the use of questioning; asking how a given policy may have potential gendering effects and other effects of processes of categorisation such as racializing, classing, disabling. Although closely linked to both discursive and lived effects, my aim is to focus the discussion of policy examples on subjectification effects in order to make visible the gendering, and at times other differencing, by asking: *who* (i.e. what people category) is targeted?; who is beneficially or detrimentally affected?; who is (implicitly) excluded?; and what assumptions are made about them? In doing so, I not only make visible policy gendering but also the classing effect of policy assuming arrangements that are facilitated by or rely on a level of financial security often associated with middle class careers or imposing given arrangements on low-income families through benefit rules. Drawing on critiques and research by Black and Asian feminist scholars, I also highlight the racializing effects of the implicit positioning of majority white work-family arrangements as the norm. Although in terms of work-family attitudes, behaviours, or moral rationalities, class manifestations are subject to change over time, here I refer to class broadly as reflecting more or less advantageous positions relating to labour market (in)security and income (in)sufficiency that pattern the constraints and opportunities for paid work and childrearing arrangements across families (see e.g. Crompton, 2006a; Duncan and Edwards, 1997; McRae, 1993). I demonstrate both a practical application of the theoretical approach and substantively trace the recent historical pathways of gendering practices across a range of UK policies relating to employment and family, showing the persistence of the underlying gender order amidst a multitude of change to individual policies.

The discussion is organised in two parts, drawing mainly on feminist critique and literature as well as some key policy acts to trace broad policy changes relating to the labour market and families with children. The first part traces the changing gendering of ‘the worker’ through taxation, in-work and out-of-work benefits and more recent ‘work-family reconciliation’ policies. This section takes as its starting point that, under the gender order of the initial post-war welfare state, the policy assumption was that ‘the worker’ was primarily a male breadwinner: it then aims to assess whether the ‘model worker’ has become less stereotypically male over time. The second part aims to trace whether the ‘normative parent’ has become less stereotypically female over time. Beginning with an overview of the assumed ‘main’ carer underpinning much policy relating to families, the section then picks up on two alternative parent representations that have received particular policy attention over the years: the lone parent and the father.

### **Labour Market policy: ‘The worker’**

#### **Setting the scene: Privileging marriage, institutionalising inequality**

The welfare state set up in Britain following the Second World War, with social security entitlement linked to employee-contributions, assumed full (male) employment, a male pattern of continuous full-time employment over the life course, and stable heterosexual marital unions. Patriarchal (and imperialist) logic excluded women from citizenship (Andersen, 2020; Lister, 1990, 1999), with the Beveridge report emphasising women’s roles as wives and mothers with derived rights through the marriage contract. The institutionalisation of the male breadwinner model was explicit in many policies in the early decades. In fact, married women were initially ineligible for a benefit for caregivers introduced in the mid-1970s because such care was viewed as part of a wife’s normal duties (Lewis, 1992).

From 1975, legislation brought formal equality to the labour market by regulating the behaviour of employers, albeit retaining the androcentric view of the worker. Formal marriage bars, permitting automatic dismissal of female employees on marriage, initially abandoned across much of the public sector in the 1940s were outlawed across the private sector through the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). The Equal Pay Act, coming into force from 1975, and initially requiring equal pay for men and women doing the same job was in 1983 extended to cover equal pay for work of equal value (following a European Court of Justice judgement). However, despite such formal equality, the assumption remained in state policy that paid work would not be a (married) woman’s primary activity or responsibility and that her wages would be of secondary value in the household finances (Lewis, 1992). This assumption is exemplified by joint taxation of spouses, whereby a married man received a higher tax

allowance than a single person. In effect boosting his take-home wages, this state-subsidised ‘family wage’ system (Seely, 1995) privileged heterosexual marriage over other relationships and living arrangements and explicitly supported a gendered division of labour. Although individual taxation was introduced in 1990, the change included a married couple’s tax allowance option explicitly set at a level to fully compensate for the drop to the husband’s tax threshold (and thus his net income) from the removal of the married man’s allowance (Seely, 2019). This allowance was abolished by New Labour a decade later but in 2015 the Conservative government introduced a new marriage allowance, whereby the lower earning spouse (or civil partner) could transfer a portion of their tax allowance if the higher earner was on the basic tax rate. Given that the lower earner in different-sex relationships tends to be the woman due to the gender pay gap and/or part-time hours, government projection was that among eligible couples the vast majority of transfer recipients would be men (Seely, 2021), thus reaffirming continued state support for unequal division of paid and unpaid work within couple households and the continued gendering of ‘the worker’ as the male breadwinner.

#### **Benefits: from unemployed breadwinners to ‘activation’ of caregivers**

The male breadwinner model bias is even stronger in the benefits system. Writing in the early 1980s, Amina Mama (Mama, 1984) highlighted the ‘legislated sexual discrimination’ of joint assessment, whereby jobseeker status was assigned to one partner paid the benefit (usually the man) in couples where neither was employed. Not only did this reiterate the man as breadwinner whether employed or not, joint assessment with assumed female financial dependency also invisibilised the lived reality of many Black and Asian women who to a greater extent have been full-time workers and equal earners or heads of households throughout the period (Brah, 1996; Carby, 1982). During the 1980s, eligibility for unemployment benefits also became more strongly linked to recent employment (Lewis, 1992), creating a barrier for re-entry after time spent caring and thus reasserting the worker as male and without care responsibilities. Despite policy rhetoric changing from the 1990s to increasingly encouraging individual self-provisioning through labour market activity, the benefit system continued to assume and reinforce women’s dependence on their (assumed male) partners for income (Lewis, 2002a; Rake, 2001). This family model requires dependable and sufficiently high-paying jobs for the man, not in reality guaranteed in many areas especially for many racialised working-class men (Brah, 1996; Carby, 1982; Dean and Shah, 2002; Reynolds, 2009). The concept of financial dependency is thus premised on a white and middle class, as well as hetero-patriarchal, ideal.

With increasing neoliberal focus on reducing state welfare and increasing individual responsibility and economic self-provisioning, more recent

employment activation policies aimed at women may be interpreted as a shift to an adult worker model with expectation of employment for all. However, from the New Deals for lone parents and 'partners of the unemployed' under New Labour to Universal Credit's extension to also include partners in low income households, these moves neither destabilise the male breadwinner family ideal nor its related 'maternalist logic' (Orloff, 2017) of caregiving. First, the strong commitment to joint means-testing for benefits and the preoccupation with 'workless' households reveal the continued assumption of the male breadwinner/female caregiver dichotomy and eclipse any focus on employment support needs of caregiving (potential) workers. As an example, New Labour's activation strategy for partners of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants provided individualised support but tied eligibility to being a financial dependant on a Jobseeker's Allowance recipient rather than own support needs (Rake, 2001), highlighting continued state endorsement of women's financial dependence on (male) partners. This focus on 'workless' households, with its inherent privileging of the male breadwinner family, continues under Universal Credit. When criticised for its disincentives for dual earning and access to independent sources of income for many women in claimant couples, the Universal Credit design was justified by the government on the basis that the priority is on reducing households without at least one earner (Bennett, 2021). The single Universal Credit payment for couples, ostensibly to mimic a salary, also reveals the underlying assumption of a single-earner/full-time carer family model, 'lead' carer work requirements notwithstanding. Second, the encouragement of maternal part-time work under Tax Credits and compulsion under Universal Credit for both lone parents and nominated lead carers in couple-families to look for at least part-time work do not challenge the breadwinner/caregiver dichotomy. Since part-time employment rarely provides financial security or pay progression in the short- or long-term, it does not provide a route to full citizenship (Andersen, 2020; Millar and Ridge, 2018; Nightingale, 2020). Disregarding existing care responsibilities and gendered household divisions of labour create role contradictions that are difficult to navigate for many (Andersen, 2020; Bennett, 2021; Millar and Ridge, 2018), but in the context of gendering effects encouraging part-time work for women with children may best be viewed as compatible with upholding the primacy of their caregiver role. It absolves the state of either supporting the combination of full-time work and caregiving *for all* or valuing childrearing through adequate levels of social security and pension protection (see e.g. Ginn and Arber, 1999; Ginn and MacIntyre, 2013, on how classed and androcentric life course assumptions in UK pension policy perpetuate working age inequalities into old age).

### Work-family 'reconciliation'?

Over the decades, as tax and arguably also aspects of benefit policies have taken some steps in the direction of assuming a self-provisioning adult worker, ostensibly gender-neutral yet modelled on an androcentric ideal life course, policies to support the combination of paid work with caring and childrearing have not to date abandoned the gendered worker/caregiver distinction. Policy efforts to encourage fathers to share childrearing have been largely absent, with UK policy makers' stated reluctance to interfere with private matters of how families organise their paid work and care thus reinforcing the gendered status quo of division of labour. As a result, as over the decades mothers increasingly re-entered or remained in the labour market following childbirth, childrearing and care remained firmly primarily their responsibility, and by extension in practice their primary responsibility. In fact, a 'maternalist logic' (Orloff, 2017) underpins 'reconciliation' policies that, despite their gender-neutral terminology, provide low or no payment for parental leaves and no incentives for men to make adjustments to their paid work. While such policies can assist some mothers to combine paid work and care, they simultaneously reinforce childrearing as a female responsibility.

UK maternity leave policy is a prime example of maternalist policy logic. The Social Security Act (1973) introduced 18 weeks of maternity allowance and the Employment Protection Act (1975) introduced 29 weeks of statutory job-protected maternity leave and protection against unfair dismissal. However, stringent eligibility criteria excluded many by requiring two years of service with the same employer (five for those working short part-time hours; Sigle-Rushton, 2009). By stipulating such male-typical employment patterns, the effects of widespread ineligibility for job-protected leave effectively continued to position mothers as primarily full-time caregivers (and workers as male). These statutory provisions have over time been extended in coverage, length and the proportion of leave that is paid, but have remained firmly attached to the mother (or in the case of adoption, a nominated main carer), setting the UK distinctly apart from other European countries (Lewis *et al.*, 2008). Further, the low level of maternity pay relative to earnings, which has persisted to the present day, demonstrates the assumption that the mother will have a (male) breadwinning partner to financially support her during maternity leave. It was not until 2003, when the Employment Act (2002) came into force, that second parents gained two weeks of statutory 'paternity' leave at birth or adoption, and not until 2011 that it became possible for parents to share 'maternity' leave (renamed 'shared parental leave' from 2015). The silence regarding assumed family form in leave policy is notable as, consistent with the gendering commitment to the nuclear family seen in other aspects of UK policy, most of the terminology has largely remained heteronormative even after adoption rights were extended to same-sex couples and single adults in 2002.



Until the late 1990s, public provision for childcare was limited and primarily targeted at children 'in need' (Lewis et al., 2008; Pascall, 1997). Importantly parental employment did not constitute a 'need', particularly impeding lone parents' prospects of entering or sustaining paid work (Lister, 1999). In fact, women's increased paid work specifically in part-time employment has been attributed to (especially Conservative) governments' resistance to policies supporting maternal paid work (Warren *et al.*, 2010). 'In the early 1960s, the State was still busy trying to encourage (white) women to stay home and embrace domestication and consumerism. It wasn't prepared to offer any childcare support to Black women who had to work' (Bryan *et al.*, 1985, p. 29), despite often having come to Britain as workers in their own right (many recruited directly into the newly established NHS). Thus because of the intersection of class, race and gender, many Caribbean women, on arrival in Britain found that the lack of council childcare – especially if they were married – forced them either into home-work, characterised by particularly poor pay and lack of employment rights and protection, or anti-social hours such as night work (Bryan *et al.*, 1985; Carby, 1982; Klug, 1989; Mama, 1984). Childcare arrangements and costs being firmly positioned as an individual responsibility is thus not only gendering with regard to 'the worker' but also classing and racializing with regard to the 'right kind' of parenting (mothering).

It was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that a broad suite of work-family 'reconciliation' policies were initiated, including the launch of the first National Childcare Strategy in 1999 with its early years education entitlement (initially for 4-year-olds, extended to include 3-year-olds from 2002). The stated policy goals were two-fold: to promote maternal employment (the entitlement was often referred to as 'free part-time childcare') as well as children's early learning (Daly, 2011; Lewis et al., 2008), yet covered only term-time and amounted to less than the minimum weekly hours of part-time work recognised for Tax Credit purposes. The 2016 Children Act extended the entitlement to 30 hours in England and Wales for (already) working lone parents and dual-earner couples. However, with almost a quarter of the year not covered and eligibility neither beginning at the end of post-birth leave nor covering required job search activity, UK childcare policy continues to fall short of genuinely assisting parents (mothers) to enter and sustain employment.

Mary Daly (2011) has argued that the policy model emerging in Europe during the first decade of the 2000s was not that of the autonomous adult worker but rather a gender-specialised dual earner family model. Similarly, this tracing of 'the worker' in UK policy over time shows that despite both activation and reconciliation moves towards an assumption and endorsement of dual-earning, or lone parent earning, the underlying family model remains gender-specialised and ultimately the changes have not altered the assumed (androcentric) shape of the worker's life course.

### Family policy: The parent

This section traces how policy has constructed particular parental subjectivities: the ‘main carer’; the ‘lone parent’ and ‘the father’ over time. Has ‘the parent’, as articulated in benefit rules, parental responsibility, leave regulations and child support legislation, changed from that female homemaker counterpart to the male breadwinner, as women’s participation in the labour market has increased, marriages have become less universal and stable and family forms have diversified?

#### The ‘main carer’

By the time of the introduction of the post-war welfare state, feminists had long campaigned in favour of a substantial amount to be paid to all mothers in recognition of their caring role (Lewis, 1978). The 1945 Family Allowances Act introduction of Children’s Allowances paid directly to mothers (replaced in the late 1970s with Child Benefit) was thus welcomed as a partial success despite being neither universal (due to pronatalist motivations) nor sufficient to challenge wives’ economic dependency. While putting all women in a vulnerable position, and inaccurate in relation to the paid work of many women of colour, the rigid construction of women as main carers financially dependent on a male breadwinner also resulted in some devastating ‘lived effects’ for migrant women and their children. Examples include Asian women threatened with deportation following divorce or widowhood (Brah, 1996), and a disproportionate number of Black children taken into foster care due to the combination of low income, lack of childcare and poor housing, along with racializing and classing assumptions about ‘normal’ mothering and family arrangements (Mama, 1984). Whereas white women’s paid work was socially accepted on the condition that it not adversely impact family (child) wellbeing, ‘black women were seen to fail as mothers precisely because of their position as workers’ (Carby, 1982, p. 49). Decades later, (white) middle-class models of the ‘right kind’ of *mothering* can similarly be seen to underlie family policies, albeit using gender-neutral language.

Family support policies have increasingly adopted an individualising frame, both under New Labour and subsequently with the austerity agenda of the Coalition and Conservative governments, disregarding and obscuring underlying structural issues of poverty and labour market precarity and directing attention instead to correcting ‘poor’ parenting (Jensen, 2012; Lehtonen, 2018; Rake, 2001). Parenting orders introduced by New Labour, which place the responsibility for children and young people’s truancy, antisocial or criminal behaviour on individual parents, provide an example. Despite gender-neutral terminology, mothers are much more likely to receive parenting orders and be summoned to court. Upholding and naturalising gendered family dynamics, officials permit paternal lack of engagement on the basis of work responsibilities and assume

and reinforce the primacy of maternal caregiving among both lone parent and couple families (Holt, 2009; Peters, 2012). Effectively, the parent held responsible is the mother.

Continued gendering of the parent despite a shift to gender-neutral policy language is also evident in the last couple of decades of benefit policy aimed at families. Both Tax Credits and Universal Credit explicitly assign ‘main’ or ‘lead’ carer status to only one parent (Bennett, 2021; Howard and Bennett, 2020). For Tax Credits this entailed payment of child-related elements to the main carer while for Universal Credit, the lead parent’s work requirement is reduced according to the age of the youngest child. Revealing the unspoken enduring commitment in benefit policy to (gendered) specialisation, there is no possibility of care-related adjustment to the work-requirements of the parent who is not nominated lead carer status, either among couples or separated parents (regardless of amount of contact). Universal Credit thus hinders equal sharing of responsibility for both earning and parenting among low-income parents, and irrespective of gender-neutral terminology the effect is as gendering as Beveridge’s explicit male breadwinner/female carer model. Despite the rhetoric of non-interference in private matters and families’ right to choose how to organise unpaid work, in practice UK policy intervenes and regulates low-income family life quite willingly, through its commitment to a patriarchal family model.

### The lone parent

Social policy and politics have long wavered between treating lone parents as workers or as carers (Lewis, 1998). In the wake of attachment theory’s rising popularity, the post-war social security system treated lone *mothers* primarily as carers. They were eligible for benefits without job seeking requirements, albeit differentiating between widows allowance and the lower (means-tested) income support for divorced or unmarried mothers (Gray, 2001; Lewis, 1998; Meulders-Klein, 1996; Song, 1996). In fact, resident lone *fathers* have historically been less of a policy and activist concern. This silence reflects a perception of them as a less ‘problematic’ people category (more likely to be in paid work thus claiming less social security benefits; Ermisch and Wright, 1995). With about nine in ten (resident) lone parents being mothers, the term is often used synonymously with ‘single mother’ (also conflating parenthood status and legal marital status), and the female-headed household is equated with the ‘lone parent family’. By extension, ‘family’ in this context means common residence, and the (non-resident) father, whether he plays an active role or not, is conceptualised as ‘absent’ from the family (although since the 1990s not excused from financial provision). However, the lack of concern about lone fathers also highlights the explicit linking of men with breadwinning, even when they are (sole) caregivers. Lone fathers on benefits were until 1975 required to look for work (Song, 1996).

Subsequently, the benefit system's formally neutral position on lone parents' employment has been eroded since the early 1990s, marking a clear conceptual shift toward viewing lone parents as (potential) workers rather than as primarily carers (Lewis, 1992, 1998), or perhaps more accurately to viewing their families as 'workless households' (Knijn *et al.*, 2007). With growing political concern about 'welfare dependency' during the 1980s, in addition to mandating paternal financial provision, the Child Support Act (1991) also included some part-time work incentives. Further, activation policies have since the turn of the century imposed increasing, and increasingly punitive, job-seeking requirements on lone parents receiving benefits (Millar, 2019; Millar and Ridge, 2018). As these requirements only apply to poor lone parents on benefits (and more recently also low-income coupled mothers on Universal Credit), policy is now effectively positioning (full-time) childrearing and care as a privilege open only to some families with a sufficiently high-earning (likely male and co-resident) breadwinner.

Yet, perhaps counter-intuitively, the male breadwinner family model has also underpinned Britain's policy approach to lone parents throughout, as the household-level means-test typically results in withdrawal of the lone parents' benefits on re-partnering. Not only does this assume income-sharing to an extent that may not reflect reality in newly formed relationships where children from previous partnerships are involved (Griffiths, 2017; Lewis, 1998; Millar, 2008), but it again reveals that policy constitutes mothers as first and foremost provided for by a man's income. Only in the absence of a man (or his earnings) will the state provide benefits and employment support to her. The subjectification effects of these policies for lone mothers, but particularly poorer, more likely to be working class and/or young mothers, and in receipt of benefits, are clear. While held responsible for their children's care and wellbeing, instead of recognition of their additional financial and support needs they have been increasingly positioned as 'problematic' due to their deviance from the 'norm' of being attached to a male breadwinner.

### **The father**

Britain's policy concern with fathers has been strongly and persistently focused on financial provision. Prior to 1973, married fathers had sole legal guardianship of their children, while unmarried fathers had few automatic legal rights or responsibilities (Lewis, 2002b; Meulders-Klein, 1996). Not until the early 2000s did being named on the birth certificate become sufficient for conferring automatic parental responsibility to unmarried fathers (among different-sex parents). However, since the 1989 Children Act, both parents have retained their parental responsibility for their child(ren) following divorce or separation, shortly followed by the Child Support Act firmly asserting that all biological fathers be required to support their children financially, irrespective of past

or present living arrangements or marital status. Further, as noted above, through joint assessment for (subsequently re-partnered) lone mothers' benefit eligibility, the social security system also expects a man to provide for the family he lives with, whether or not children in that household are related to him. In effect, both biological and social fathers are positioned as financial providers. Despite the capacity to pay maintenance being potentially limited for fathers on a low income, especially if also supporting co-resident children, and possibly affecting the affordability of maintaining father-child contact (Lewis, 1998, 2002b; Millar, 1994), the ministerial response to this critique in the early 1990s unequivocally prioritised financial maintenance over contact (Lewis, 2002b). Thus, clearly demonstrating a lack of policy commitment to paternal caregiving, the policy reproduces traditional gender roles of the father as breadwinner and the mother as carer, whether living together or apart (Millar, 1994).

From the 1991 Child Support Act to the current benefit system, policy also has an inflexible conceptualisation of the living arrangements of families with separated parents. For the purposes of Child Benefit, child elements of Tax Credits, and Universal Credit, child(ren) can be registered as living with one parent only (irrespective of actual arrangements). Although social housing allocation operates on a local level with possible variations in the treatment of 'non-resident' parents as either a single adult or a family unit (Harding and Newnham, 2015), housing benefit treats a parent whose children are not registered as living with them as a single individual, thus restricting the affordability of housing suitable for shared care and overnight stays. That active parenting and caregiving across households cannot be accommodated within the benefit system again reinforces the nuclear family ideal, with the classing implication of paternal contact and caregiving being positioned as a privilege.

The policy ambivalence on fathers as carers is also evident in the lack of policy on father-involvement in childrearing aimed at fathers residing with their children. Policy and politicians have long considered family leave and pay policies barriers to economic competitiveness of businesses that employ (potential) parents (Browne, 2013), rather than valuing and rewarding the care and time parents devote to reproductive labour. Thus, the two weeks of statutory paternity leave introduced for fathers (and second parents in the case of same-sex couples and adoption) in 2003, is paid at a low flat rate. From 2011, Additional Paternity Leave enabled mothers to transfer up to half of the maternity leave entitlement to the father/second parent, conditional on her return to paid work. However, neither Additional Paternity Leave, nor its replacement Shared Parental Leave from 2015, incentivised take-up by fathers. The government impact assessment report on Additional Paternity Leave suggests its introduction was a symbolic gesture rather than a genuine attempt to support more involved fathering. Projecting low take-up at 4-8% of eligible fathers and noting that among those the 'time taken is unlikely to be greater than 13 weeks but

could be considerably less' (BIS, 2010, p. 4), these assumptions were justified based on evidence from other countries showing low take-up without father-specific entitlement quotas. Despite repeated calls for reform, at the time of writing, findings and recommendations from a 2018 government evaluation of Shared Parental Leave have yet to be published. It is also notable that the leave is only available to couple fathers; another institutionalised limitation of non-resident fathers' ability to share care.

### Conclusion

This paper contributes to the rich literature of British feminist policy critique by providing a practical application of Bacchi's theoretical perspective of policy as gendering practices to policy history. I argue that despite a multitude of changes to work and family policies, their *gendering* effects have remained remarkably consistent. British social policy has not been consistently committed to a more equitable gender regime. Instead, as my analysis demonstrates, the gender order upheld by policy has remained effectively unchanged. The apparent range of 'people categories' available under the heading of parent might at first glance suggest recognition of diverse family forms and roles. Similarly, compelling mothers in receipt of benefits to undertake (at least part-time) paid work might appear to indicate that policy no longer assumes 'the worker' to be male and without caring responsibilities. Yet these policy moves mask a persistence in the heteronormative family ideal across policies. Parents are not positioned as interchangeable in their provider and carer roles, nor indeed as each having dual roles. Instead, privileging the patriarchal nuclear family model, they reinforce gendered division of labour by dictating that there be a main or lead carer, usually the mother, while the father figure (irrespective of residence) remains primarily a financial provider. Neither when living together nor in separate households are both (or all) parents positioned as equally important and required as carers, and the lead carer/earner distinction genders parents in much the same way as the explicitly gendered male breadwinner/female carer model did.

The implication of revealing the persistence of these conceptualisations that are constituted through policy (despite often being naturalised) is that there needs to be a major shift in the underlying citizenship framework. As Judith Lorber argues, '[an] unequally structured gender order needs to be addressed directly, through a feminist degendering movement' (Lorber, 2000, p. 86). The policy history presented in this paper shows that specific recommendations – such as, for example, the need for individual entitlement to affordable post-birth and adoption leave for fathers and partners – are insufficient if the commitment to privileging the nuclear family and state-sanctioned gendered division of labour remains intact elsewhere. Such reforms need to be

complemented by benefit, housing, employment and pension policies that support and encourage individuals' caregiving responsibilities within and across households as well as their attainment of full citizenship irrespective of labour market or relationship status. Policy needs to break with the tradition of 'separate spheres' and both better value and rebalance the division of care between women and men and between individuals and the state. These are not new ideas (e.g. Fraser, 1997; Lister, 1990, 1999) but rather reaffirm decades of ongoing feminist critique and campaigning. However, the analysis presented in this article also contributes to and extends this literature by demonstrating how gendered people categories are actively shaped on an ongoing basis through policy. Conceptually the gendering practices approach thus directs attention toward a radical redefinition of citizenship, toward asking how policy might instead be designed to actively resist and dismantle the gender hierarchy.

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### Competing interest

The author declares none.

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