European Journal of Politics and Gender • vol XX • no XX • 1–18

Print ISSN 2515-1088 • Online ISSN 2515-1096
https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16613569438355
Accepted for publication 24 August 2022 • First published online 22 September 2022

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Filling in the middle: the 'workless' frame in action in UK welfare reform

Laura Richards-Gray, l.richards-gray@bbk.ac.uk
Birkbeck University of London, UK

The gender-blind 'workless' frame has been increasingly prominent in UK welfare discourse in recent decades and has played a significant role in the political justification of Universal Credit – a key plank of UK welfare reform since 2013. Meanwhile, Universal Credit has been highlighted as problematic for gender equality. This article seeks to 'fill in the middle' between the use of the 'workless' frame in recent welfare discourse, including at the agenda-setting stage of Universal Credit, and the gendered implications of Universal Credit. It does this by analysing how the frame functions in government evaluation frameworks and impact assessments (including equality impact assessments), and in the implementation of Universal Credit (drawing on secondary analysis of interviews with claimants and focus groups with welfare practitioners). The analysis suggests that the 'workless' frame is promoting gender rowback by de-gendering welfare, devaluing care – particularly that performed by lone parents – and undermining the sharing of care in couple households.

Key words Universal Credit • welfare • gender • workless • worklessness • UK

Key messages

- It is vital to examine the role of gender-blind frames after the agenda-setting stage.
- The assumptions of the 'workless' frame minimise consideration of unpaid care.
- The gender-blind 'workless' frame plays a significant role in government evaluation and assessment of Universal Credit.
- The 'workless' frame has led to gender rowback by de-gendering and devaluing care.

To cite this article: Richards-Gray, L. (2022) Filling in the middle: the 'workless' frame in action in UK welfare reform, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, XX(XX): 1–18, DOI: 10.1332/251510821X16613569438355

Introduction

This article takes UK welfare reform as a case study to analyse whether frames matter for gender equality in the evaluation, assessment and implementation of policy. Although welfare is not an explicitly feminist policy domain, that is, one specifically targeted at increasing equality between women and men, it is an important one for feminist analysis. Women are significantly more likely to be dependent on welfare

than are men because they are more likely to be primary carers for children and other dependants, limiting their participation in paid work (Pascall, 2012). This means that women are most likely to be impacted as a result of the removal of, or the tightening of access to, state support. Unsurprisingly, therefore, austerity measures introduced in many countries following the 2008 financial crash have had a disproportionate and negative impact on women, and this has certainly been the case in the UK (Karamessini and Rubery, 2019). In particular, Universal Credit (UC) – a key plank of welfare reform in the UK since 2013 – has been highlighted as problematic for gender equality (Cain, 2016; Garnham, 2018).

Meanwhile, a central political justification for welfare reform in the UK in recent times has been the need to tackle 'worklessness' (Wiggan, 2012; Pantazis, 2016). The 'workless' frame has also been noted to be problematic from a gender perspective, promoting the assumption that only paid work is work and ignoring the unpaid work in the home often undertaken by women (Richards-Gray, 2020). The need to reduce 'worklessness' and the number of 'workless households' was a key justification for the introduction of UC (DWP, 2010e).

UC is a monthly means-tested benefit, introduced in 2013 by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010–15) to replace six previous benefits and tax credits.[1] Rollout has continued under Conservative governments since 2015 and is currently due for completion by 2024.[2] The gendered implications of UC have been examined elsewhere (Cain, 2016; Andersen, 2020). The aim here is to examine how the gender-blind 'workless' frame may be functioning after the agenda-setting stage to disadvantage women. Such approaches as gender equality policy in practice (GEPP) (Engeli and Mazur, 2018) and critical frame analysis (CFA) (Verloo, 2005) emphasise the importance in feminist policy analysis of shifting the focus beyond agenda-setting (see the introduction to this issue). Taking a cue from such approaches, this article seeks to 'fill in the middle' between the use of the 'workless' frame in recent welfare discourse, including at the agenda-setting stage of UC, and the gendered implications of UC. It does this by analysing how the frame functions in government evaluation frameworks and impact assessments (IAs) (including equality impact assessments [EIAs]), and in the implementation of UC (drawing on secondary analysis of qualitative interviews with claimants and focus groups with welfare practitioners conducted as part of the Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC]-funded Welfare Conditionality [WelCond] project).[3]

The analysis shows that despite welfare being a highly feminised issue, the gender-blind 'workless' frame plays a key role in government evaluation frameworks and IAs for UC. While it plays less of an explicit role at the implementation stage – that is, welfare practitioners do not explicitly use the frame – the gender-blind assumptions of the frame permeate, minimising consideration of unpaid care as a barrier to many women's participation in paid work. Overall, it is argued that this frame is promoting gender rowback, that is, it is 'working against the promotion of gender equality' (Engeli and Mazur, 2018: 122).

The article begins with an overview of the rise of the 'workless' frame in welfare discourse and the gendered impact of recent welfare reform, including UC. It then describes the approach taken to analyse the role of the frame, before going on to present analysis of this relating to the evaluation, assessment and implementation of UC. The article then discusses the implications of the frame for gender equality, before concluding.

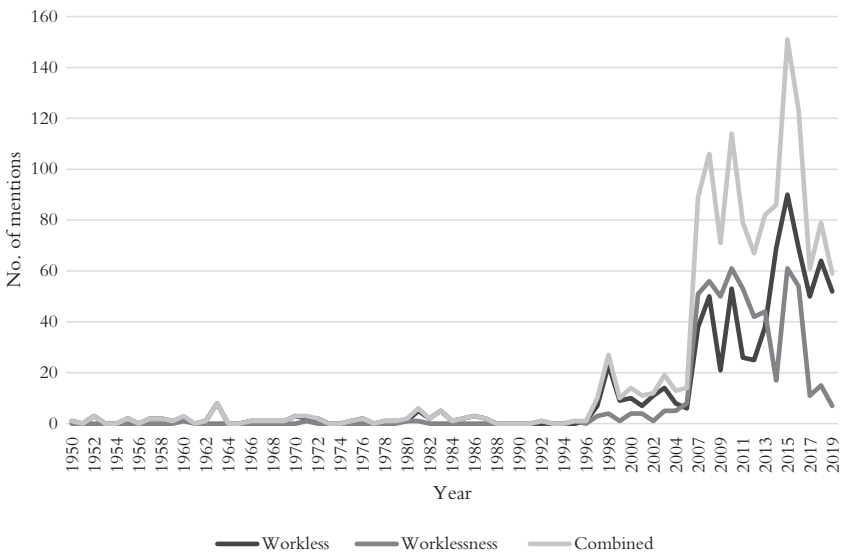
Background

The rise of the gender-blind 'workless' frame

In 1996, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) began collecting data on the number of 'workless households'. This reflected political concern about the rise in households with no one in paid work since the mid-1970s (though the proportion of individuals in paid work had remained stable) (Gregg and Wadsworth, 2011). It also coincided with concern about child poverty, which was higher in such households, especially lone-parent households (Dickens, 2011). Since then, these figures have increasingly been used by politicians instead of unemployment figures to justify welfare reform (Figure 1 illustrates the rise of the use of the terms 'workless' and 'worklessness' in the House of Commons over time). This has gendered implications. Whereas the unemployed are those that 'are able to start work within the next two weeks', 'workless' statistics encompass those previously classed as 'economically inactive', including those with care commitments (ONS, 2018). Therefore, those providing care within the home are subsumed into the category 'workless', suggesting that they undertake no work at all. This minimises consideration of the value of unpaid care – for children, the elderly and disabled people – and the barrier this poses to many in relation to paid work. This is particularly problematic for lone parents, 90 per cent of which are women – while only 4 per cent of couple households with dependent children are 'workless', 32.4 per cent of lone-parent households are. Furthermore, the focus on reducing the number of 'workless households' ignores the benefits of incentivising second earners (usually women) within couple households – undermining women's financial independence and the sharing of unpaid care within couples.

Although arguments regarding the need to tackle 'worklessness' have been on the rise for several decades, the Coalition government embraced these with 'renewed

Figure 1: Use of the 'workless' frame in the House of Commons, 1950–2019



Source: Based on Hansard data (available at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/). Please note: excludes data for 2005 as this is unavailable.

vigour' (JRF, 2012: 9). Against the backdrop of the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis, they quickly initiated public spending cuts in the name of reducing the deficit. In justifying these cuts, they marginalised structural explanations for unemployment and poverty, and instead attributed these to a culture of 'worklessness' and dependency (Wiggan, 2012; Pantazis, 2016).

The 'workless' frame played a key role at the agenda-setting stage of UC. Usage of the frame in the House of Commons peaked in 2010 and 2015 in the lead-up to the two pieces of primary legislation relating to UC (the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016). Key policy documents also justified UC in the name of tackling 'worklessness'. The Green Paper *21st Century Welfare* (DWP, 2010a) and the White Paper *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works* (DWP, 2010e) used 'workless' as a synonym for being out of paid work, promoting the assumption that only paid work is work and those not in paid work are doing no work or none of value. These documents also promoted the assumption that 'worklessness' is attributable to a lack of personal responsibility and a culture of benefit dependency (Wiggan, 2012). It was also simultaneously portrayed as a symptom of poor financial incentives to move into paid work (encouraging people to remain on benefits) and as the primary cause of poverty (see, for example, DWP, 2010a: 10). The proposed solution was to 'make work pay' through: (1) improved financial incentives for people to enter paid work or increase their hours (by letting people keep more of their income); and (2) a 'strong system of conditionality' (DWP, 2010e: 4), that is, increased expectations relating to job-seeking requirements and harsher sanctions for non-compliance. Meanwhile, there was very little acknowledgement of the likely gendered impact of UC (Oxfam, 2010), no acknowledgement that unpaid work looking after children within the home is work or of value, and very little recognition that care may be a barrier to people taking up paid work or increasing their hours (Richards-Gray, 2020). Advocates speaking for women at this stage pushed back on the likely negative impact of UC on gender equality (DWP, 2010b), rather than on the frame and its assumptions.

Gender, welfare reform and UC

From the late 1970s, welfare states across Europe have been recast from the male-breadwinner model towards the adult worker model or one-and-a-half worker model (where a part-time earner role is promoted for mothers) (Daly, 2011). In particular, 'welfare to work' reforms in the UK from the late 1990s have increasingly demanded that women engage in paid work while scaling back support for care within the home.[4] However, this has been against a backdrop of persistent gendered divisions in paid and unpaid work, as well as inadequate investment in care services. Significant moves were made towards individualisation and the 'activation' of women benefit claimants – particularly lone mothers – under the New Labour governments of 1997–2010, with little regard for their care work (Grabham and Smith, 2010). Furthermore, the financial crash of 2008 ushered in a period of austerity and public spending cuts, which has hit women hardest (Karamessini and Rubery, 2019). In particular, benefit cuts and new job-seeking requirements placed on claimants since 2010 have significantly exacerbated the conflict between women's roles as paid workers and unpaid carers (WBG, 2019b).

UC has been highlighted as particularly problematic from a gender perspective (Cain, 2016; Garnham, 2018; Griffiths, 2018), including for the following reasons: it has represented a loss in income for women, particularly lone-parent households (EHRC,

2018); it has the potential to undermine women's independence in couple households due to the streamlining of multiple benefits and tax credits into a single monthly payment (Annesley and Bennett, 2011),[5] including hindering the ability to escape abusive relationships (WBG, 2018); it is likely to undermine the sharing of paid and unpaid work within couples because there are reduced incentives for second earners (usually women), couples need to nominate a 'main earner' and 'main carer', and help with childcare costs is paid in arrears (Griffiths et al, 2022); and it has significantly increased conditionality for main carers in both couple and lone-parent households (Andersen, 2020).

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has claimed that UC is a 'gender-neutral' policy, saying '[w]here men and women are in the same circumstances they are treated equally' (DWP, 2012b: 23). However, women and men are rarely in the same circumstances (WBG, 2019a). Therefore, UC might more accurately be described – like the 'workless' frame itself – as gender-blind. Despite the prominence of the frame at the agenda-setting phase of UC, there has been little analysis of how it has functioned after this from a gender perspective. The next section explains how this article helps address this gap.

Approach

This article draws on the tradition of analysing the role of ideas in policymaking (Campbell, 1998; Béland and Cox, 2011) and of taking a discursive approach to policy analysis (Bacchi, 2009; Lombardo et al, 2009) (for a discussion of this literature, see the introduction to this issue). Frames are often 'considered to be an optimal unit of analysis in ideas-based policy research' (Koon et al, 2016: 803). Verloo defines a policy frame as 'an organising principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful policy *problem*, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly enclosed' (Verloo, 2005: 20, emphasis added).

To analyse the role of the 'workless' frame in UC after the agenda-setting stage, this article adopts a question-asking approach influenced by CFA and its 'sensitising questions' (Verloo, 2005), as well as Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) framework. However, whereas Bacchi's focus is on the way in which policy issues are problematised more broadly, the approach proposed here is designed to evaluate the function of a specific frame in policy. Bacchi's approach also does not incorporate an analysis of the way in which policy solutions are built into representations of the policy problem as explicitly as here. CFA encourages more explicit focus on frames and on the policy solutions promoted by frames, though the focus is on using 'sensitising questions' as an 'interpretative tool when reading policy document[s] in search for policy frames' (Dombos et al, 2012: 7). Here, we start with the frame and conduct an analysis of its role after the agenda-setting stage. Both the WPR and CFA approaches have been regularly applied to study the design, framing and implementation of gender policies; here, the focus is analysing how 'gender-blind' frames in mainstream policies may lead to transformation of gender relations.

The two key research questions addressed are:

- What role, if any, is the 'workless' frame playing after the agenda-setting stage in UC?
- If it is playing a role, what are the gendered implications of this?

To address the first question, the following was asked of data relating to the evaluation, assessment and implementation of UC:

Q1. Is the frame present?
Q2. How does it function/what's the problem?
Q3. What assumptions underpin the way in which the frame is being used?
Q4. What is the solution proposed?
Q5. Is there any discussion of gender (or any advocates speaking for women)?

The results of this analysis are presented in the next three sections. The second research question is addressed in the Discussion section.

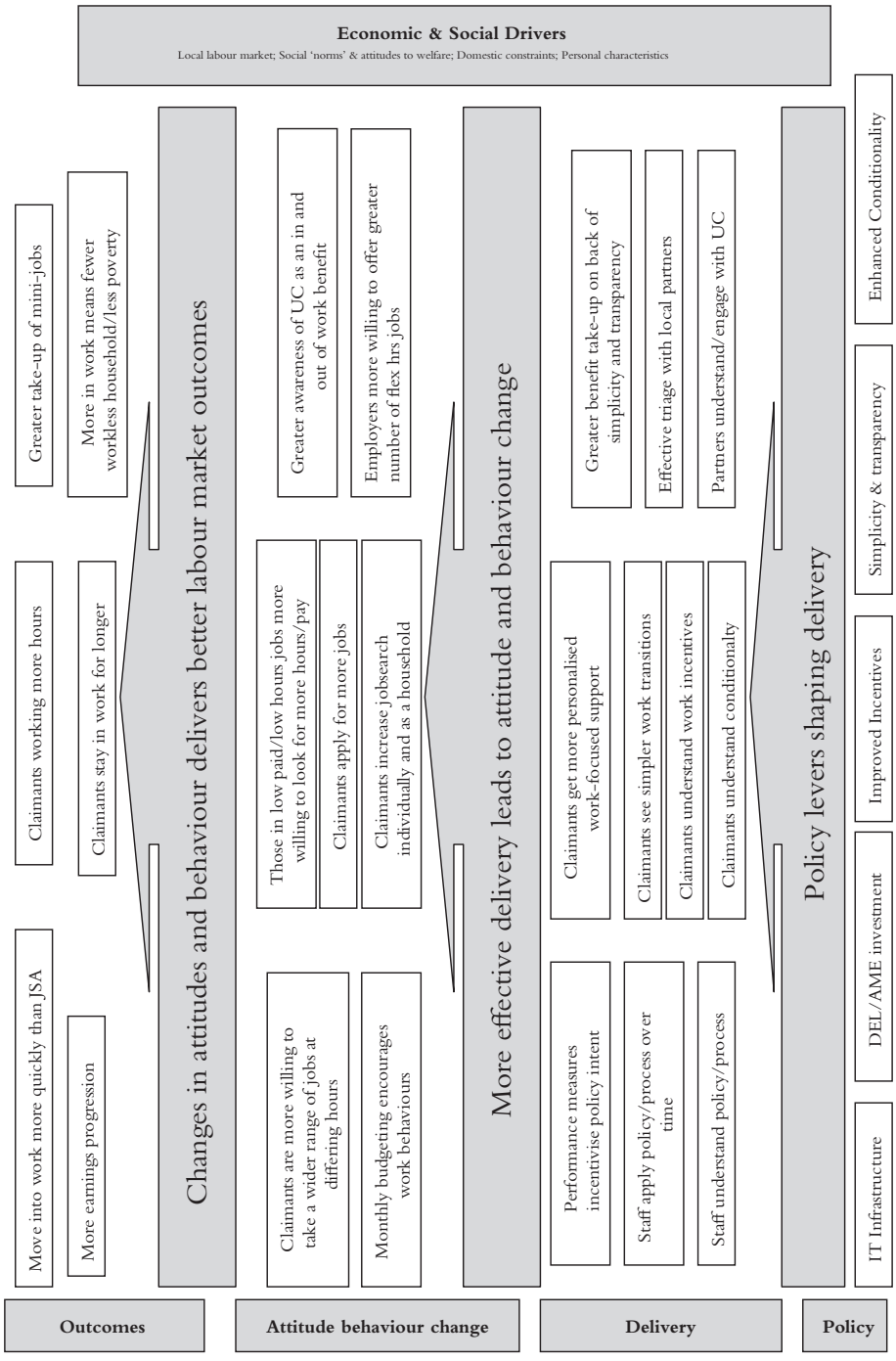
The analysis draws upon sources of data relevant to the post-agenda-setting stage of UC. First, government evaluation frameworks are considered to analyse how the frame is functioning in plans for judging the success of UC once rollout is complete. Second, government IAs and EIAs are analysed. These provide valuable insight into the functioning of the frame in evaluations of the likely impact of the policy, including on equalities in the case of EIAs. Third, secondary analysis is conducted of qualitative data from the ESRC-funded WelCond project (Dwyer et al, 2019). This ran from 2013 to 2018 and involved focus groups with welfare practitioners and qualitative longitudinal interviews with welfare service users (claimants). The analysis in this article draws on three practitioner focus groups specifically relating to UC and 17 interviews with eight UC claimants. Focus-group participants were those from local councils, housing associations, charities and so on who were working closely with UC claimants. In many cases, their role involved providing claimants with advice and support, and they were therefore well placed to comment on how UC was being implemented at the time. The claimant interviews included in the analysis are with those who were on UC with caring responsibilities; this included five lone parents (three women and two men) and three in couples with children (two women and one man). UC was predominantly confined to single people at the time of the fieldwork; however, these data provide a valuable insight into the implementation of UC in relation to those with caring responsibilities in the early years of its rollout.

All data were coded inductively in Nvivo guided by the five questions outlined earlier. A combination of content analysis (to examine the presence of the frame in line with Q1) and discourse analysis (to explore the problem, assumptions and solutions associated with the frame in line with Q2–Q4) was used. The discourse analysis used is a form of post-structuralist analysis; the aim is to move beyond the study of language only 'to identify, within a text, institutionally supported and culturally influenced interpretive and conceptual schemas (discourses) that produce particular understandings of issues and events' (Bacchi, 2005: 199). In line with this, the gendered silences related to the use of the frame are explored (Q5). This is important, as silences limit what can be thought of as appropriate policy solutions and minimise consideration of negative effects for certain groups (Bacchi, 2009: 12–14). The next section begins the analysis, looking at the functioning of the frame in government evaluation frameworks for UC.

Judging success: government evaluation frameworks

The original evaluation framework for UC (DWP, 2012a) did not contain the frame; however, the second evaluation framework (DWP, 2016) did. As at the

Figure 2: Theory of change underpinning improved labour market outcomes under UC



Source: DWP (2016: 11). Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

agenda-setting stage, it not only functions here to describe the economic status of being out of paid work, but is also associated with welfare dependency. In the document's theory-of-change model (see Figure 2), 'More in work means fewer workless households/less poverty' is predicted as a labour market outcome as a result of 'changes in attitudes and behaviour' brought about by UC (DWP, 2016: 11). Again, as at the agenda-setting stage, here 'worklessness' is implicated in causing poverty.

These documents also reproduce the assumptions underpinning the frame at the agenda-setting stage and propose the same solution. Both documents adhere to the assumption that paid work is work and unpaid work is not, stating that UC 'will be available both in and out of work' (DWP, 2012a: 4–5; see also DWP, 2016: 5) and that it aims to 'tackle the problems of poor work incentives' (DWP, 2012a: 6). Again, the behavioural assumption is also prominent; assessing changes in attitudes and behaviours is one of five key evaluation themes (DWP, 2012a: 9–10; DWP, 2016: 7–8), and the documents state that 'changes in perceptions and beliefs towards work and welfare receipt' will be examined (DWP, 2012a: 10).

The solution, based on these assumptions, is clear in the stated objective of UC in these documents: 'to simplify the current benefits system to make work pay' (DWP, 2012a: 5). This is also reflected heavily in the key policy aims against which the success of UC will be judged, including the first aim: to 'Encourage more people into work and to make even small amounts of work pay and be seen to pay' (DWP, 2012a: 6; see also DWP, 2016: 5). The assumptions that only paid work is work and that attitudes and behaviour play a key role in determining whether people are in or out of paid work underpin two key aspects of the proposed solution to make work pay: (1) participation in paid work will be encouraged through increasing incentives to find or increase the amount of hours in paid work, primarily to be achieved by a simplification of the system and revisions to the marginal deduction rates (DWP, 2012a: 5); and (2) the behavioural aspect will be tackled through increased conditionality, that is, ensuring that life is harder on UC than in paid work (DWP, 2012a: 5–6).

Neither document directly acknowledges the way in which UC is likely to interact with existing gender relations or the impact it might have in this regard. In line with the assumption that only paid work is work, neither acknowledge unpaid work as valuable. Both documents are also light on acknowledgement of unpaid work as a potential barrier to seeking or increasing paid work. Both just make the general statement that UC provides 'households with a basic allowance topped up by additional components to recognise the needs of families with children, housing costs, disability and health conditions that limit work, and caring responsibilities' (DWP, 2012a: 4–5; see also DWP, 2016: 5). Other references to how UC will interact with unpaid work are only made in relation to the monitoring of the impact on attitudes and behaviour. Both documents say that there will be a focus on 'changes in labour market behaviour', as well as 'changes to individual and household behaviours, including household decision making about areas including work, budgeting, caring responsibilities' (DWP, 2012a: 10; see also DWP, 2016: 8). Again, therefore, at this stage, the issue of gender and unpaid work is largely silenced; the only reference to this is in the context of whether UC will be successful in changing the attitudes and behaviour of those with care responsibilities, and encouraging them to seek or increase their paid work.

Impact Assessments

The Equality Act 2010 contains the public sector equality duty, requiring public authorities to pay due regard to equalities – including gender equalities – in the undertaking of their functions. One way of doing this is to produce an EIA. Three EIAs explicitly relating to UC are considered here (DWP, 2010c; 2011a; 2011c). Further, three IAs (intended to set out the broader costs and benefits of the policy to inform decision making) are included in the analysis (DWP, 2010d; 2011b; 2012b).

The 'workless' frame appears 76 times across these documents (appearing in all but one). Again, it functions as a substitute for being out of paid work, and in the majority of cases, it is used in the context of justifying the introduction of UC as a means of better incentivising paid work ('making work pay') and reducing the number of 'workless households'. The frame is again associated with poverty: 'Universal Credit will radically simplify the system to make work pay and combat worklessness and poverty' (DWP, 2010c: 4). As with the evaluation frameworks, these documents reproduce the assumptions that only paid work is work and those not in paid work are work*less*. They also reproduce the assumption that being out of paid work is a cultural, as well as an economic, issue, that is, some are choosing to be on welfare or not trying hard enough to get a job: 'A tighter sanctions regime will also provide a greater incentive to comply with the jobseeking requirements. This should increase the amount of productive jobsearch' (DWP, 2010d: 16). These documents also reproduce the same proposed solution: to make work pay through increased incentives to participate in paid work and increased conditionality and sanctions. Importantly here, though, as with the evaluation frameworks considered earlier, the frame is built into the mechanisms for judging the success of this solution. It is claimed that increased 'work incentives', '[R]educed administrative complexity associated with a move into work' and '[R]einforcement of the conditionality regime' will lead to 'a reduction of 300,000 in the number of workless households … driven by three different groups – people moving from worklessness into part-time work, people moving from worklessness into full-time work, and people who leave work' (DWP, 2010d: 13). These assessments also illustrate the predicted impact of UC on improving participation tax rates (a common measure of the incentive to engage in paid work) for those moving into paid work from 'workless' households. Here, again, the frame is built into the mechanism for assessing the ability of the new system to 'make work pay'.

We might expect there to be some significant recognition of gender in the context of considering the potential impact of UC on women in these documents, especially in the EIAs given that the stated purpose of these is to ensure that: 'strategies, policies and services are free from discrimination; due regard is given to equality in decision making and subsequent processes; and opportunities for promoting equality are identified' (DWP, 2010c: 3). Feminist scholars have highlighted, however, that EIAs for recent welfare reforms, including UC, have been inadequate (WBG, 2019a). This conclusion is supported by this analysis.

Where the analysed documents discuss the impact of UC on women, in line with the assumptions of the frame, this is measured in terms of improved paid work incentives, instead of the likely impact on their ability to manage paid and unpaid work commitments. It is claimed that women – especially lone mothers – will benefit from improved incentives to move into paid work or increase their hours, and that increased conditionality for lone parents will get 'more women in work' (DWP,

2010c: 13) and reduce child poverty (DWP, 2010d: 15). The impact of increased conditionality on lone parents is also discussed in terms of costs versus savings to the Treasury; the cost of transferring lone parents onto 'the more intensive JSA [Jobseeker's Allowance] and ESA [Employment and Support Allowance] regimes … prior to transfer' is considered but weighed against the subsequent reduction in the number on 'out of work benefits' (DWP, 2010d: 15).

There is very little recognition that unpaid care might be a barrier to participation in paid work. It is recognised that 'women's employment rates are below those of men (68.8% compared to 75.4%)' (DWP, 2010c: 8), but existing gender roles are not explicitly recognised as a factor. There is the suggestion that 'conditionality arrangements' will be 'calibrated to certain circumstances like the child care responsibilities of lone parents' (DWP, 2010c: 13), and improved incentives to 'work' fewer than 16 hours mean that 'it will be easier for parents, particularly lone parents, to fit work with their caring responsibilities' (DWP, 2010c: 9). However, the overriding assumption is that the main driver for women – in particular, lone mothers – not being in paid work is poor incentives to be so, rather than structural barriers, such as their unpaid care responsibilities. For example, the first IA uses a hypothetical lone parent to illustrate that simplification of the system will increase incentives to move into paid work by reducing the number of agencies to be notified when making this transition (DWP, 2010d: 12).

Implementation: 'making work pay' the gender-blind way?

Analysis of the WelCond data (Dwyer et al, 2019) suggests that the assumptions underpinning the frame at the agenda-setting stage and in the documents considered earlier have been reproduced in the implementation of UC, though the frame itself was not used by practitioners or claimants. Welfare practitioners accepted that work is paid work, and there was very little reference to the value of unpaid work. There was also the suggestion that claimants lack certain personal attributes and skills, for example, responsibility and ability to budget. In this context, there was support for the principle of UC, in that it is promoting 'self-sufficiency' and responsibility – mainly through encouraging paid work and better financial management (as a single payment is made from which claimants need to budget, pay their rent and so on).

In line with other research (Andersen, 2020), the data also suggest that the proposed solution – to 'make work pay' – may be being applied at this stage with inadequate flexibility and consideration of the barrier posed by unpaid care. Two themes arise: (1) increased expectations, including on primary carers, to find/increase paid work, with reduced support to meet these expectations; and (2) sanctions applied for failure to meet these expectations, with little flexibility to account for care responsibilities. These themes are discussed further in the following.

Increased expectations with reduced support

Practitioners reported an intensification of expectations placed on claimants and a largely one-size-fits-all approach to conditionality. There has been a significant increase in conditionality under UC for both women with children in couple households (who are subject to conditionality for the first time) and lone parents (Andersen, 2020). Main carers are required to attend 'work-focused interviews' when

their youngest child is aged one, 'prepare for work' when their youngest turns two and seek paid work when they turn three (meaning those with preschool children are required to seek paid work for the first time). This is most likely to impact lone parents given that they juggle these expectations and childcare alone. Meanwhile, flexibilities to account for childcare responsibilities have been reduced under UC (Andersen, 2020), meaning that more are subject to the sanction regime (WBG, 2019b: 5–6), which, in turn, has intensified. Practitioners were concerned about claimants, including primary carers, who have had time away from paid work – and may lack confidence – being pressured to sign unrealistic claimant commitments[6] and then finding it difficult to meet the expectations placed upon them. There was also concern that they may sign these without fully understanding what they are agreeing to and/or the consequences (in term of sanctions) if they fail to meet the requirements: "you've got [a] claimant commitment in front of you, you've not got enough money to support your family, whatever is put in front of you to get that money you'll sign it" (practitioner). This concern was borne out in the claimant interviews. Some did not remember signing a claimant commitment or were uncertain as to what they had agreed to when signing these; others said that the number of hours of job seeking expected of them was unreasonable given the limited number of jobs available, was hard to achieve without their own computer and/or was difficult to fit around other responsibilities.

Alongside this intensification of expectations, practitioners and claimants reported a decline in the support offered to claimants in coping with and meeting these. Under UC, work coaches were said to fulfil a surveillance, rather than support, role – no longer offering claimants advice and help to find paid work (as under the previous system), but instead just checking that they were fulfilling their claimant commitments. Therefore, despite being subject to increased expectations, those with caring responsibilities were suffering from a reduction in support to find or increase their paid work: 'At this moment in time, I don't see it trying to support me…. Bullying…. That's the only way I can describe it' (lone parent). Primary carers were also not getting the help they needed to afford childcare. Although up to 85 per cent of childcare costs can be claimed under UC, this is paid in arrears. Practitioners reported that those they work with would struggle to meet the upfront cost of this out of their income, and this was echoed in the claimant interviews. There was scepticism that this is accounted for as a barrier to paid work for those with care responsibilities in the implementation of UC: "They're basically saying the more hours I work, the better off I'll be…. What they don't take into consideration is the childcare" (lone parent); "What they don't tell you is that you have to wait … five weeks to try and claim any childcare costs back. It's a nightmare" (couple claimant). This echoes other research that has highlighted this, as well as the administrative burden of claiming costs back, as a barrier to second earners (usually women) in couples taking up or staying in paid work (Griffiths et al, 2022: 63).

More sanctions with less flexibility

Alongside an intensification of expectations, practitioners also noticed more individuals being "sanctioned very easily for what can be described as very, very minor indiscretions" (practitioner). Those working close to UC suggested that JobCentre work coaches were being put under pressure to regularly apply sanctions for the non-

fulfilment of job-seeking requirements[7]: "The reality of it is people are being kind of told by management … 'You need to be sanctioning more'" (practitioner). Although there was said to be some acknowledgement that those with childcare responsibilities will need to restrict their hours of paid work,[8] there was said to be little flexibility in the application of sanctions once claimant commitments are signed. Claimants were regularly sanctioned for things like turning up late for appointments due to family commitments or in error, for example, for missing appointments they had attended. Little scope was said to be built into the system for individual circumstances to be taken into account. This is in line with a downgrading of many lone-parent flexibilities in place since 2008 to guidance only under UC (Andersen, 2020). There was also said to be variation in how these were being applied from one JobCentre or work coach to another, leaving claimants unsure of what flexibility they would be afforded. Again, this is in line with a broadening of advisor discretion under UC (Cain, 2016).

Meanwhile, claimants reported extreme hardship caused by sanctions, exacerbating other financial issues caused by the design of UC to 'mirror the experience of those in work' (DWP, 2011c: 23). Budgeting on low incomes was said to be much harder with the single monthly payment, and some were struggling to pay back rent arrears accrued during the five-week wait for their first payment. Practitioners also suggested that any sanctions applied to the standard allowance (the only element of UC that can be sanctioned) of the main earner in couple households are likely to reduce the amount going to the main carer and children – a suggestion supported by research by Griffiths et al (2020). Furthermore, under UC, the housing element is paid to the claimant instead of directly to the landlord, as was previously the case (again designed to mimic the budgeting arrangements of those in paid work) (Millar and Bennett, 2016). This means that, if sanctioned, parents may use the housing element to meet day-to-day costs – including feeding and clothing their children – leaving them vulnerable to eviction. This is likely to particularly apply to lone parents, as they are coping on a lower income, and especially lone parents under 25, who receive less under UC (Garnham, 2018). The imposition and threat of sanctions was a big area of concern for claimants and practitioners: "in effect, what they are doing is saying, 'Whatever we take from you … you need to make that up from money that's … there to look after your children or pay your rent'" (practitioner). The process necessary to override sanction decisions or to get appeals heard is gruelling. However, the evidence suggests that there are advocates from supporting organisations speaking for those with caring responsibilities at this stage, pushing back on the grounds for sanctions, helping them mount appeals and assisting them with access to foodbanks during the period the sanction applies.

Discussion: the 'workless' frame and the gendered implications of UC

We have seen that, as was the case at the agenda-setting stage, the 'workless' frame is prominent in government evaluation frameworks and IAs for UC. In these documents, the frame is functioning as a problematic economic status, being portrayed as a cultural problem of welfare dependency and implicated in causing poverty. The primary assumption underpinning the functioning of the frame in these government documents, and evident in the implementation data, is that only paid work is work.

The assumption that the 'workless' are choosing not to be in paid work is also evident. The proposed solution to 'worklessness' in the government documents is to 'make work pay' through improved paid work incentives and stricter conditionality, including sanctions for non-adherence to job-seeking requirements. The data relating to implementation suggests that this may be being implemented with inadequate regard for the impact on those with care responsibilities.

This proposed solution is also supported by a series of gendered silences. First, there is little acknowledgement of the potential gendered impact of UC; perhaps most surprising is that this was not recognised to any significant degree in the government documents (even in the EIAs, designed to evaluate UC's impact on equalities). Second, there is a lack of acknowledgment of care as work or as valuable. Third, in the government documents, as at the agenda-setting stage, there is little acknowledgement of care as a potential barrier to paid work. While there is recognition of this in the implementation of UC in relation to the right to restrict hours in paid work/job seeking when drawing up claimant commitments, the data considered here suggest that this is not necessarily the case once these are signed; rather, sanctions were said to be regularly applied to those with care commitments when they did not meet job-seeking requirements.

The 'workless' frame can be seen to be contributing to the harmful gendered effects of UC in several ways. First, the frame and the way it functions de-genders welfare. The analysis suggests that it is promoting the assumption of a homogeneous group not in paid work and doing no other useful activity. This silences consideration of the ways in which UC will interact with existing gender norms and promotes the idea that all are equally able to respond to new paid-work incentives and conditionality standards under UC designed to 'make work pay'. Again, although there remains some scope for main carers to restrict their paid work/job seeking, there has been a significant increase in conditionality for this group under UC (Andersen, 2020). When not able to meet the new standards because of their care responsibilities, main carers bear the brunt of cuts and the application of sanctions; indeed, women are more likely to be sanctioned under UC in every age bracket between 16 and 59 years old, and particularly between 25 and 39 (common child-rearing years).[9] This is exacerbated by the assumption that 'worklessness' is a cultural or behavioural problem, with people trapped in dependency, choosing not to be in paid work and thus causing their own poverty. As most 'workless' households with children are headed by lone parents (ONS, 2015), they are most likely to suffer the resulting reputational damage. This assumption also simultaneously absolves the state of any significant role in supporting these parents to care for their children and of responsibility for their, and their children's, poverty when such support is withdrawn.

Second, the frame and the way it functions devalues care. Those not in paid work are work*less*; care is not considered to be work or socially beneficial. Therefore, there is little role for the state in supporting this within the home, with main carers subject to 'work-related requirements' from the point at which their youngest child turns one. Furthermore, because care is not valued, the success of UC in gender-equality terms is measured by the number of women (primarily lone mothers) that it gets into paid work. Tackling 'worklessness' at the household level plays a key role in devaluing the care work of lone parents; applying the adult-worker model at the household level increases pressure on this group to juggle paid work and unpaid care responsibilities, as they are increasingly pushed into paid work as the only adult in

the household. This continues a trajectory towards the 'writing off' of low-income lone mothers' care work that was under way under New Labour – a trajectory that increasingly 'restricts their autonomy in choosing work that is right for their family circumstances, and subjects them to ever-increasing degrees of surveillance and coercion' (Grabham and Smith, 2010: 81).

Third, the same frame that is legitimising the increased 'activation' of lone mothers is also undermining incentives to share paid work and care within couple households. It is made clear in the government documents that the aim of UC is to reduce the number of 'workless' households, and it is therefore 'designed to encourage work at a household level' (DWP, 2011c: 23). The focus is thus on getting one person in the household into paid work, and incentives for 'second earners' are considered less important:

> As the focus of Universal Credit is to help reduce workless households there is a risk of decreased work incentives for second earners in couples (primarily women). Since having no parent in work has been shown to have an impact on young people's lives and attitudes to work, the Government believes that helping at least one person into work could help break the cycle of worklessness in a family. (DWP, 2011c: 23)

It is also suggested that decreased paid work incentives for second earners might have a positive effect on 'family life' by allowing second earners to 'reduce or rebalance their hours or to leave work' (DWP, 2011c: 24). The likely negative impact on women's financial independence and on the sharing of care within the home is therefore justified in the name of tackling 'worklessness' at a household level. This, in effect, is a reinforcement of the male-breadwinner model within couple households. Although there is some recognition of care in this scenario, it is assumed that, if income allows, this will be done by the would-be second earner (usually the woman).

Conclusion

This article has sought to advance understanding of how the 'workless' frame is functioning after the agenda-setting stage in relation to UC. The analysis suggests that this is promoting gender rowback by de-gendering welfare, devaluing care – particularly that performed by lone parents – and undermining the sharing of care in couple households. It has based its analysis on data relevant to the post-agenda-setting stage of UC, namely, government evaluation documents, government IAs and implementation data from the ESRC-funded WelCond study from 2013–18. Additional, and more up-to-date, interviews with those directly involved in the implementation of UC would be useful to further explore how the 'workless' frame is functioning at that stage. It will also be crucial to extend the analysis to government evaluation of UC when rollout is complete.

This article has also sought to make a methodological contribution. In policy analysis – particularly relating to welfare – there is often much written on the gender-blind justifications for reforms at the agenda-setting stage and on the gendered implications of reform. This article stresses the need to 'fill in the middle' – to examine the ways in which gender-blind frames function after the agenda-setting stage to shape gendered outcomes. It has also proposed an approach – drawing on CFA and WPR – to do

this, helping to address the 'methodologically underdeveloped' nature of ideational research (Swinkels, 2020: 298).

ORCID iD

Laura Richards-Gray https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9957-1249

Notes

[1] Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit.

[2] See: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51318730.

[3] Funded under ESRC grant no. ES/K002163/2. See: www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/.

[4] Until 2008, lone parents could receive Income Support until their youngest child turned 16. Those with three-year-olds now need to seek paid work.

[5] While Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Amber Rudd committed to more UC payments going to the main carer. However, this can be overridden.

[6] The agreement outlining the claimant's job-seeking requirements.

[7] It should be noted that the focus groups were run in 2015, shortly after a period of high sanction rates. Rates subsequently fell and were low during COVID-19 but are on the rise again at the time of writing (see: https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/briefing/david-webster-university-glasgow-briefings-benefit-sanctions).

[8] If their youngest child is aged three or four, main carers need to do a maximum of 16 hours per week of paid work/job seeking. This increases to 25 hours if the child is aged five to 12 and 35 hours if they are 13 or older (see: www.gov.uk/universal-credit/your-responsibilities).

[9] Based on data from December 2021 to February 2022 (see: https://stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/login.xhtml).

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks go to Amy Mazur and María Bustelo for all their help and support in the development of this article. Data for the implementation analysis kindly provided with the consent of research teams at the University of Leeds, London South Bank University, Cardiff University, Edinburgh University, Open University, affiliated research teams at other universities through the Timescapes Data archive, administered by University of Leeds, sponsored by the ESRC and the University of Leeds. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for the time they took to read and comment on this.

Author biography

Laura Richards-Gray is Lecturer in British Politics at Birkbeck, University of London, UK. Her research focuses on the role of elite and public discourse in political and social change, including from a gendered perspective. She is also currently co-convenor of the Political Studies Association's Women and Politics Specialist Group.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References

Andersen, K. (2020) Universal credit, gender and unpaid childcare: mothers' accounts of the new welfare conditionality regime, *Critical Social Policy*, 40(3): 430–49. doi: 10.1177/0261018319856487

Annesley, C. and Bennett, F. (2011) Universal credit may reinforce the traditional 'male breadwinner' model and affect many women's access to an income, *British Politics and Policy at LSE*, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/37262/1/blogs.lse.ac.uk-Universal_Credit_may_reinforce_the_traditional_male_breadwinner_model_and_affect_many_womens_access_t.pdf, (Accessed: 21 Sep 2019).

Bacchi, C. (2005) Discourse, discourse everywhere: subject 'agency' in feminist discourse methodology, *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 13: 198–209.

Bacchi, C.L. (2009) *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?*, Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Australia.

Béland, D. and Cox, R.H. (2011) *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Cain, R. (2016) Responsibilising recovery: lone and low-paid parents, Universal credit and the gendered contradictions of UK welfare reform, *British Politics*, 11: 488–507. doi: 10.1057/s41293-016-0034-4

Campbell, J.L. (1998) Institutional analysis and the role of ideas in political economy, *Theory and Society*, 27: 377–409. doi: 10.1023/A:1006871114987

Daly, M. (2011) What adult worker model? A critical look at recent social policy reform in Europe from a gender and family perspective, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 18: 1–23. doi: 10.1093/sp/jxr002

Dickens, R. (2011) Child poverty in Britain: did work work?, in P. Gregg, J. Wadsworth, J. Blanden, S.R.F.A. Bryson, A.E. Clark and R. Dickens (eds) *The Labour Market in Winter: The State of Working Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dombos, T., Krizsan, A., Verloo, M. and Zentai, V. (2012) *Critical Frame Analysis: A Comparative Methodology for the QUING Project*, Budapest: Centre for Policy Studies, Central European University.

DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) (2010a) *21st Century Welfare*, London: The Stationery Office.

DWP (2010b) *Consultation Responses to 21st Century Welfare*, London: The Stationery Office.

DWP (2010c) Equality impact assessment *Universal Credit: Welfare That Works*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181148/universal-credit-equality-impact-assessment.pdf

DWP (2010d) Impact assessment for Universal Credit. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181147/universal-credit-ia-white-paper.pdf

DWP (2010e) *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works*, London: The Stationery Office. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/48897/universal-credit-full-document.pdf

DWP (2011a) Universal Credit budgeting advances: equality impact assessment. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220169/eia-budgeting-advances-wr2011.pdf

DWP (2011b) Universal Credit impact assessment. https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/impact-assessments/IA11-040D.pdf

DWP (2011c) Welfare Reform Bill Universal Credit: equality impact assessment. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220152/eia-universal-credit-wr2011.pdf

DWP (2012a) Universal credit evaluation framework. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180879/universal-credit-evaluation-framework.pdf

DWP (2012b) Universal Credit impact assessment. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220177/universal-credit-wr2011-ia.pdf

DWP (2016) Universal Credit evaluation framework 2016. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536193/ad-hoc-report-34-universal-credit-evaluation-framework-2016.pdf

Dwyer, P., Fitzpatrick, S., Fletcher, D.R., Flint, J., Johnsen, S., Scullion, L. and Wright, S. (2019) *Welfare Conditionality Dataset*. University of Leeds, UK: Timescapes Archive. doi: 10.23635/13

EHRC (Equality and Human Rights Commission) (2018) The cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms. https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/cumulative-impact-assessment-report.pdf

Engeli, I. and Mazur, A. (2018) Taking implementation seriously in assessing success: the politics of gender equality policy, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1: 111–29. doi: 10.1332/251510818X15282097548558

Garnham, A. (2018) Something needs saying about Universal credit and women – it is discrimination by design, Child Poverty Action Group, https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/something-needs-saying-about-universal-credit-and-women-%E2%80%93-it-discrimination, (Accessed: 14 Jun 2022).

Grabham, E. and Smith, J. (2010) From social security to individual responsibility (part two): writing off poor women's work in the Welfare Reform Act 2009, *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 32: 81–93. doi: 10.1080/09649069.2010.484226

Gregg, P. and Wadsworth, J. (2011) Workless households, in P. Gregg, J. Wadsworth, J. Blanden, S.R.F.A. Bryson, A.E. Clark and R. Dickens (eds) *The Labour Market in Winter: The State of Working Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Griffiths, R. (2018) Universal credit, women and gender equality: a retrograde step?, https://blogs.bath.ac.uk/iprblog/2018/09/19/universal-credit-women-and-gender-equality-a-retrograde-step/, (Accessed: 14 Jun 2022).

Griffiths, R., Wood, M., Bennett, F. and Millar, J. (2020) *Uncharted Territory: Universal Credit, Couples and Money*, Bath: University of Bath. https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/uncharted-territory-universal-credit-couples-and-money/attachments/Uncharted-Territory-Universal-Credit.pdf

Griffiths, R., Wood, M., Bennett, F. and Millar, J. (2022) *Couples Navigating Work, Care and Universal Credit*, Bath: Institute for Policy Research.

JRF (Joseph Rowntreee Foundation) (2012) *Are 'Cultures of Worklessness' Passed Down the Generations?*, York: Joseph Rowntreee Foundation.

Karamessini, M. and Rubery, J. (2019) Prolonged austerity and gender equality: the cases of Greece and the UK compared, in M.C. Marcuzzo, A. Palumbo and P. Villa (eds) *Economic Policy, Crisis and Innovation: Beyond Austerity in Europe*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Koon, A.D., Hawkins, B. and Mayhew, S.H. (2016) Framing and the health policy process: a scoping review, *Health Policy and Planning*, 31: 801–16. doi: 10.1093/heapol/czv128

Lombardo, E., Meier, P. and Verloo, M. (2009) *The Discursive Politics of Gender Equality: Stretching, Bending, and Policy-Making*, London: Routledge.

Millar, J. and Bennett, F. (2016) Universal credit: assumptions, contradictions and virtual reality, *Social Policy and Society*, 16: 169–82. doi: 10.1017/S1474746416000154

ONS (Office for National Statistics) (2015) Working and workless households in the UK: 2015, www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/workingandworklesshouseholds/2015-10-06, (Accessed: 14 Jun 2022).

ONS (2018) Working and workless households in the UK: October to December 2017, www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/workingandworklesshouseholds/octobertodecember2017, (Accessed: 14 Jun 2022).

Oxfam (2010) *A Gender Perspective on 21st Century Welfare Reform*, Oxfam. https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/118087/gender-perspective-welfare-reform.pdf?sequence=1

Pantazis, C. (2016) Policies and discourses of poverty during a time of recession and austerity, *Critical Social Policy*, 36: 3–20. doi: 10.1177/0261018315620377

Pascall, G. (2012) *Gender Equality in the Welfare State?*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Richards-Gray, L. (2020) Political discourse and gendered welfare reform: a case study of the UK Coalition government, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2020.1760283.

Swinkels, M. (2020) How ideas matter in public policy: a review of concepts, mechanisms, and methods, *International Review of Public Policy*, 2: 281–316. doi: 10.4000/irpp.1343

Verloo, M. (2005) Mainstreaming gender equality in Europe: a critical frame analysis approach, *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 117: 11–34.

WBG (Women's Budget Group) (2018) *Universal Credit and Financial Abuse: Exploring the Links*, UK Women's Budget Group, End Violence Against Women and Surviving Economic Abuse. https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FINAL-full-report-financial-abuse-and-uc.pdf

WBG (2019a) 'Gender-neutral': Universal credit equality impact assessments, https://wbg.org.uk/blog/gender-neutral-universal-credit-equality-impact-assessments/, (Accessed: 18 Jun 2021).

WBG (2019b) *Social Security and Women*, UK Women's Budget Group. https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SOCIAL-SECURITY-2019.pdf

Wiggan, J. (2012) Telling stories of 21st century welfare: the UK Coalition government and the neo-liberal discourse of worklessness and dependency, *Critical Social Policy*, 32: 383–405. doi: 10.1177/0261018312444413