

# How UK social policies continue to uphold work and family gender inequalities



*Despite various changes since the establishment of the post-war welfare state, [Jenny Chanfreau](#) argues that UK social policies have maintained an unequal gender regime. Current policies continue to gender 'the worker' and 'the parent' much like William Beveridge's explicitly gendered male breadwinner/ female carer model did.*

Formal equality of men and women in the labour market has been a legislated requirement for several decades. For example, [equal pay for work of equal value](#) has been protected since 1983. Nonetheless, the most recent statistics recorded the [median gender pay gap at 15.4%](#).

The latter is often 'explained' to a large extent by men and women's different behaviour after becoming parents. Yet this behaviour is strongly shaped by policies, because maternity/ paternity/shared parental leave and pay, along with a whole host of other policies articulate possibilities for combining paid work and childrearing differently for men and women.

Carol Bacchi's theoretical lens of [policies as gendering practices](#) draws attention to the role of policy in the complex ongoing social construction and negotiation of gender. The approach asserts that policies contribute to constituting categories of people, i.e. the meanings associated with groupings of people, such as mothers and fathers. This attention to policies as processes of categorisation also highlights how policy assumptions of 'appropriate' behaviour for women and men are often implicitly white and middle-class as well as gendered, and thus simultaneously also racializing, classing, heteronorming.

Applying this approach, [I traced the gendering of 'the worker' and 'the parent'](#) through taxation, in-work and out-of-work benefits, leave, childcare, child support and social housing policies over time, and conclude that despite a multitude of changes to work and family policies, their gendering effects have remained remarkably consistent.

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. The Beveridge report emphasised women's roles as wives and mothers with derived rights through the marriage contract. In the early decades, the institutionalisation of the male breadwinner model was explicit in many policies, most obviously through joint taxation but there are plenty of other examples. Did you know, for example, that when a benefit for caregivers was introduced in the mid-1970s married women were initially ineligible because such care was presumed to be part of a wife's normal duties?

Fast forward to current times and there might be individual taxation of earnings, but the male breadwinner model is perpetuated through means-tested benefits for low income families. Universal Credit explicitly assigns 'lead' carer status to only one parent, whose work requirement is reduced according to the age of the youngest child. The terminology may be gender-neutral but this reveals an 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).

Further, given that part-time work rarely provides financial security or pay progression in the short- or long-term, encouraging part-time work for 'lead carers' (usually mothers) may then 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. This highlights the state's continued endorsement of women's financial dependence on (male) partners. Which, as an aside, is also apparent in the low salary replacement levels for post-birth leave.

So, Universal Credit actively hinders equal sharing of responsibility for both earning and parenting among low-income parents. The [single payment for couples](#), ostensibly to mimic a salary, further exemplifies the underlying assumption of a single-earner/full-time carer family model. Thus, irrespective of gender-neutral terminology, the effect is as gendering as Beveridge's explicit male breadwinner/female carer model. This example also shows that despite rhetoric of non-interference in private matters and families' right to choose how to organise unpaid work, in practice UK policy intervenes and regulates (especially low-income) family life quite willingly, through its commitment to a patriarchal family model.

Focusing in specifically on policies aimed at separated/lone parents, we can see that Britain's policy concern with fathers has been strongly and persistently focused on financial provision, and ambivalent about their role as carers. Through a combination of child support rules and the household means test for benefits, policy positions both biological and social fathers as financial providers. Meanwhile, inflexible conceptualisation of family living arrangements means that active parenting and caregiving across households cannot be accommodated within the benefit system. As an example, irrespective of actual arrangements, housing benefit treats parents as a single individual if their children are registered as living with the other parent. The single person's lower benefit rate which restricts the affordability of housing suitable for shared care and children's overnight stays. Given that most children whose parents live in different households usually reside with the mother, benefit rules that hinder rather than support shared care are not only gendering fathers as breadwinners and mothers as carers, but also have classing effects. Contact and caregiving is being positioned as a privilege not afforded to low-income separated fathers in receipt of benefits.

I argue that despite a multitude of changes to work and family policies, including the introduction of shared parental leave and pre-school early years education entitlement, their *gendering* effects have persisted. 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 the consistency of the gender-specialised family ideal across policies. Parents are not positioned as interchangeable in their provider and carer roles, nor indeed as each having dual roles, instead policy stipulations that there be a lead carer reinforce gendered division of labour, as the father figure 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.

Instead of committing to a more equitable gender regime, throughout individual changes British social policy has overall maintained a consistent gender order over time. The implication is that specific policy recommendations for increasing equality, such as individual entitlement to leave for fathers and partners, are insufficient if the commitment to privileging the nuclear family and state-sanctioned gendered division of labour remains intact in other policies. Such moves need to be complemented by reforms to benefit, housing, employment and pension policies to 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.

---

Note: the above draws on the author's published article in the [Journal of Social Policy](#).

### About the Author



[Jenny Chanfreau](#) is a Research Fellow in Demography at the UCL Social Research Institute.

Photo by [Kenneth Sørensen](#) on [Unsplash](#).