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WORKING PARENTHOOD AND PARENTAL OBLIGATION

Abstract

This article reports upon aspects of a small-scale qualitative study of low-income working families. The study was conducted in the context of recent policy changes in Britain that are intended to promote labour force participation by low-income parents, especially mothers. It is argued that while popular opinion is generally supportive of mothers taking paid employment, some deep-rooted ambivalence remains. Mothers in low-income families can experience the life-course transition involved as difficult in terms of the practical obstacles, the moral dilemmas and the ideological pressures. Without additional measures to support them in relation to their parental obligations low paid women are being pressed, at best, to exchange familial dependency for economic exploitation.

Fundamental changes are currently occurring in the relationship between labour markets and families, changes that current social policies tend to promote. This article discusses those changes and draws on recent qualitative research, conducted specifically in the British context, in order to address the implications. Of particular concern are the potentially problematic life-course transitions experienced by some women and the associated ambiguities that may be observed in moral and political discourse. The long-term trend towards women's labour force participation has had vital emancipatory consequences, but policy interventions to enforce such participation can also increase the exploitation of working mothers.

Working parenthood as a secular norm

It is now commonly accepted that changes in the nature of economic forces at the global level are reflected in changes both in the structure of labour markets throughout the industrialised world and in the roles assumed by nation states (e.g. Burrows and Loader 1994, Esping-Andersen 1996, Held et al 1999). As labour markets become increasingly 'flexible' and the capacity of nation-states directly to ameliorate social inequality through welfare provision is compromised by the nature of international capitalism, so the nature of society itself is transformed. We now inhabit, some have argued, a risk society in which we must negotiate a more precarious relationship with the labour market and look to the state to do little more than facilitate the management of individualised risk (e.g. Beck 1992, Giddens 1994, Jordan 1998). In the context of such change, the composition and functioning of families has also been subject to radical change (e.g. Gittins 1993, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Fox Harding 1996).

The death of the male breadwinner?

The 'Beveridgian' post-Second World War welfare settlement was premised on what has been defined as a male breadwinner model of the family (e.g. Lewis 1992, Land 1994). Policy makers assumed, broadly speaking, that the 'traditional' family consisted of a breadwinning husband who could expect to enjoy life-long full-time employment, earning a wage sufficient – subject to universal family allowances, free

health care and education – to support a dependant wife who would provide full-time care for their children and whose earnings (if any) would be incidental to the household income. Though arguably, the male breadwinner model never did fit the social reality (Lewis 2000), it has now been decisively overtaken by economic and social change (Land 1999). The assumptions on which the model depended were undermined – by the growing instability and casualisation of labour markets, the decline of full-time male employment and the expansion of labour force participation by women; and by the decline of marriage, the rise of cohabitation and an increase in the number of lone-parent families. Whether or not the social changes affecting families and household composition were themselves precipitated by labour market changes and by social policies is a contested issue: none the less it is such changes that began gradually to afford women (and other groups) the prospect of limited autonomy from family dependency (e.g. Finch 1989). The reality, however, is that in the last quarter of the twentieth century we have witnessed a certain polarisation between dual-earner families on the one hand and no-earner families on the other (with unemployed two-parent households and female headed lone parent-households disproportionately included among the latter).

However, the concept of the dual earner family encompasses a variety of forms, including arrangements involving part-time employment that may entail relatively few working hours and may generate comparatively low incomes. In fact, the dual *career* household, in which both partners enjoy life-long full-time employment, remains a comparative rarity since women’s employment is still far more likely than men’s to be part-time, impermanent and relatively poorly paid. Jane Lewis, for example, has suggested that ‘[t]he norm in the UK has become the “one-and-a-half earner household”’ (2000: 53). The secular trend, therefore, is towards the acceptance of working parenthood as a norm, although the unequal distribution of responsibility for child-care between men and women and the lack of affordable formal childcare provision means it is a change that bears with particular salience upon mothers.

Attitudes to change

Social attitude data would indicate that by and large people in Britain and indeed across Western Europe are prepared increasingly to accept the norm of working parenthood. As Table 1 demonstrates a substantial and increasing majority consider that both members of a heterosexual cohabiting couple should contribute to household income; that having children need not inhibit the freedom of parents in relation, for example, to labour force participation; that a mother’s relationship to her children need not be prejudiced by her participation in the labour force. However, support for the compatibility of paid work and motherhood is more qualified when more precise circumstances are specified: in particular a majority in all the national survey samples remained concerned that pre-school children may suffer if their mothers worked full-time (Scott et al 1998: 29).

[insert Table 1 about here]

The cross-national differences here are interesting. Both West Germany¹ and Sweden had and continue to have higher *overall* levels of funded daycare provision for children (though the level provision for very young children, aged 0-3, is similar in West Germany to that in Britain) (Moss 1996). In the *Lander* that formerly comprised

West Germany – a socially conservative welfare regime that explicitly supported mothers who choose to stay at home to care for young children – there is less disagreement than in Britain with the idea that children can inhibit parents' freedom, but more agreement that work is not detrimental to a mother's relationship with her children: this may tend to suggest on the one hand that German people find that state incentives for mothers to stay at home amount perversely to a curtailment of freedom, but on the other that they have greater confidence in the quality of the daycare provision that is available in Germany. In Sweden – a classic example of a social democratic regime that explicitly encourages women's labour force participation but also makes generous parental leave provision – there is more agreement than in Britain with the idea that both partners should contribute to household income and less disagreement with the idea that children can inhibit parents' freedom: this would seem to suggest that Swedish people have higher expectations of the labour market both with regard to its accessibility and its capacity to accommodate the needs of parents.

Social attitude data, however, inevitably mask some of the complexities of people's beliefs. Majority opinion may acknowledge the trend to working parenthood and attitudes to women's employment have clearly been changing, but there is still a body of opinion that is opposed to combining parenthood and paid work. Hakim (1996), for example, has demonstrated that though some women in the labour force are committed to long-term careers, many others are content to work part-time and prefer to commit time to their roles as mothers and/or family carers. None the less, it would be a mistake to assume that individual attitudes are starkly polarised. Duncan and Edwards (1999) in their study of lone-mothers and paid work demonstrated that though some identified themselves primarily as mothers and others primarily as workers, there were also those that regarded both roles as integral to their identity. Other research has demonstrated that although lone-parents may well be strongly motivated to enter the labour market at some point in the future, they prefer to prioritise their role as parents until their children pass a certain age (Dean and Taylor-Gooby 1992, Ford 1996, Bradshaw et al 1996).

The British policy regime and its implications

Britain's New Labour government has declared that it is committed to 'making it easier for families to balance work and home' (Home Office 1998). However, this commitment emerged in the context of another – 'work for those who can, security for those who cannot' – and a determination that '[t]he new welfare state should help and encourage people of working age to work where they are capable of doing so' (DSS 1998: 2). The implication of the 'welfare-to-work' approach for family policy is that poor families are expected to earn their way out of poverty. The New Deals, that made individual assistance available to enable and assist key groups to enter the labour market, have been targeted not only upon registered unemployed people, but upon lone parents and the partners of registered unemployed people (e.g. Millar 2000). Though the government has stopped short of directly compelling mothers to work, attendance at work-focused interviews is to be made compulsory for lone parents in receipt of income support and the partners of those claiming job-seekers' allowance.

'Joining up' labour market and family policy

So far as families are concerned, however, there are several components to New Labour's welfare-to-work approach. The government aims on the one hand to make work pay for families – through the introduction of the working families tax credit (WFTC) and a modest national minimum wage, but on the other to make working parenthood easier through such 'joined up' initiatives as a national childcare strategy and the promotion of 'family friendly employment'.

WFTC is a means-tested in-work cash benefit payable both to lone-parent and two parent families in which at least one parent is in full-time low paid employment. Although WFTC is more generous than family credit (the benefit it replaced) the advantages it offers to the poorest families are circumscribed – first, because gains in WFTC are off-set by reductions in other means-tested benefits, including housing benefit; secondly, because additional childcare tax credits under the WFTC scheme are generally insufficient to meet the full cost of formal childcare in many parts of the country (Daycare Trust 2000a) and, in any event, are not payable for the kinds of unregistered childcare upon which poorer families tend in practice to rely. WFTC is usually paid not as a conventional social security benefit, but in the claimant's pay packet through the employer: the intention is to establish a clearer link in claimants' minds between employment and the income they receive, though the consequence is to empower the principal breadwinner in the family (which in two parent families is still usually the man) in a way that will not necessarily benefit other family members (Goode et al 1998). What is more, WFTC might perversely function in the case of two parent families to restore the possibility that men with limited earning potential will none the less be able to support a 'traditional' family with a non-working wife (Land 1999 and see Dean and Shah, forthcoming). Added to these limitations, past research has demonstrated that in-work benefit schemes have only a limited effect in promoting labour force participation (Marsh and McKay 1993, Ford et al 1996) and, because the recipients of in-work benefits seldom move on to higher paid jobs (Bryson and Marsh 1996), they are not especially effective in lifting families out of poverty.

In spite of these potential drawbacks, it may be argued that WFTC should be seen in context with the other measures New Labour has introduced. The national childcare strategy, though welcome, has not yet ensured an adequate supply of genuinely affordable childcare. The most recent statistics indicate that Britain's 'childcare gap' is closing only very slowly: the number of children aged 0-8 per registered childcare place has declined from 7.5 in 1999 to 6.9 in 2000 (Daycare Trust 2000c). Relatively speaking the childcare strategy is only modestly funded and, because it places considerable emphasis on local partnerships, is heavily dependent on input from local government, voluntary and commercial sectors (e.g. Moss 2000). Legislation to promote 'family friendly' employment has in practice extended to that which was minimally required to comply with EU directives on working hours, parental leave and part-time working and, beyond this, government is relying primarily on campaign activity aimed at encouraging employers to change their working practices (Daycare Trust 2000b).

Findings from research: the vulnerability of low-income families

The author has recently undertaken a small-scale qualitative study to investigate the perceptions and day-to-day survival strategies of the kinds of families such policies are intended to benefit. The object was not at this early stage to evaluate the impact of

the new policies so much as to explore the context into which they have been introduced. The research involved in-depth interviews with 47 low-income working families in two separate locations in South East England and half a dozen major employers. The principal findings, which are reported in greater detail elsewhere (Dean and Shah, forthcoming) were essentially threefold.

First, the study demonstrated the limited extent to which low-income families are in command of their day-to-day survival strategies. Our interviews sought to explore the total package of resources (in cash and in kind) on which the families depended and the kinds of work (both formal and informal) in which their members engaged. Though some could call on income or practical support from informal sources, relatives and friends, many did not or could not. If, in the present economic environment, wages cannot be relied upon to sustain such families an in-work benefit, like WFTC, is clearly necessary to their survival though it cannot by itself ensure that they will be lifted out of poverty.

Secondly, it would appear that 'family friendly' employment policies are likely most to benefit 'valued' (and therefore higher paid) employees rather than 'expendable' (and therefore lower paid) workers. Because of a continuing shortfall in affordable childcare and the limited nature of the duties imposed on employers, there is a risk of a growing divide between secure middle-class families that will enjoy assisted childcare, career breaks and time off when they need it, and poorer working families who will be dependent on unassisted childcare from other family members or friends and receive only minimal concessions granted by reluctant employers.

Thirdly, there is some evidence that the pressure exerted by welfare-to-work policies may exacerbate both the exploitation of some low-paid workers and the sense of insecurity experienced by low-income working families. Some working parents were accepting low pay or were acceding to unreasonable demands from their employers in return for a minimal degree of flexibility to accommodate their needs as parents. Others, fearing competition from workers without parental responsibilities or even from illegal or undocumented labour, were prepared to forego or else felt disadvantaged by their new entitlements. Low paid employment will remain no less precarious as a result of the government's supply-side initiatives and yet another observable effect of recent policy developments is further to stigmatise in the minds of some low-income working families the safety-net benefits that exist for non-working families. This serves to undermine working families' sense of security in the sense that they may feel they have 'further to fall' if they should lose their job.

Low-income working families could remain chronically vulnerable in spite of the raft of policies described. The experience of working parenthood is likely to be quite different for poor parents than for better off parents. Additionally, however, as we explored the nature of the respondents' discourse in relation to working parenthood, another set of issues emerged and it is to these that this article now turns.

Moral dilemmas and life-course transitions

The study suggested that current policies may for some mothers be fuelling personal moral dilemmas and driving quite difficult life-course transitions. It emerged that, though people may be ignorant of policy detail, they tend to be acutely aware of the trends that policy is designed to promote. Within popular discourse, it would seem, there is a latent ambiguity concerning the new 'norm' of working parenthood on the one hand and moral expectations of parental responsibility on the other and, for some,

this is experienced as a real tension. Policies to promote labour force participation by parents in general and mothers in particular can impact in very different ways. The meanings such policies have for lone-parents have to some extent been investigated (Bryson et al 1997, Duncan and Edwards 1999), but our findings suggest that these issues can be just as important within two parent families. Lone parents tended to rely on more diverse household survival strategies and to be better informed about policy matters than were parents in two parent households, but on some issues their feelings and experiences were very similar.

At issue here is both the nature of the commitment that some mothers have to their parenting role, but also the consequences that are entailed at the point when they step out of that role and enter the labour market. It is possible to explore these ambiguities or tensions at three different levels: at the level of every-day experience; in the context of moral decision making; and in terms of political or ideological discourse.

Quotidian realities

Of the individual respondents in the study who were themselves in formal employment at the time of the interview, just over a quarter were women who had returned to the labour market after a period spent as a full-time parent or 'home-maker'. By and large they had been anxious to do so, both for the additional income and to 'get out of the house'. However, the transition from full-time parenthood to paid worker could be difficult. In part, of course, the difficulties were practical: the difficulties of arranging childcare, negotiating manageable hours, dealing with the benefits system. The complexity and stress of the experience could be overwhelming:

I was working long hours, not seeing anything of the kids, the money was junk, yeah, and I just wasn't coping. And I had so many problems with housing benefit getting their act together, council tax benefit getting their act together and that, and I – it got too much. I got to the stage where I just wanted to scream. And I was so tired at the end of the week and I'd end up – I was coming home and I was just, basically, yelling at the kids.

However, the difficulties could be deeper, if less tangible in nature:

It's all of a sudden – going back after all those years I hadn't worked, and it's a totally different life when you're sort of working to being with kids and everything and I found it hard. It's not like you're leaving school, going into a job. You don't have 'What are we gonna have for dinner tonight'. You don't have 'Are the kids alright at school' And you know you've got sort of both: you've got to concentrate on your job, you're there as well as you're still at home – in your mind

We have become accustomed to studying the ramifications of 'youth transitions', including the economic transition from school to work (e.g. Coles 1995). Arguably the transition that is negotiated – characteristically by mothers – from home to work is a socially constructed life-course event of parallel and increasing significance. The idea of 'family-friendly' employment or 'work-life balance' may address the logistics of combining home and work, but not necessarily the dynamics and meaning of the transitions that some parents face.

Asked whether they enjoyed their jobs, and why, respondents often referred to intangible benefits or inherent satisfactions associated with their need for something to occupy them, for social contact or self-esteem. None the less some said they

worked purely to earn money and a few regarded the routine nature of their work and lack of responsibility as a positive advantage in so far that their employment was not the primary source of their self-identity and need not interfere with those commitments that are for them of greater ontological significance:

To an extent, not having any responsibility [*laughs*]. I've just got to sell people their cigarettes or whatever and that's it, and its bye bye and you know ...

People's priorities are bound to differ, but underlying some of the tensions mothers were experiencing was the lack of choice about the transition they had negotiated:

I don't ever tell her [daughter] I have to come to work to earn the money. I say I enjoy it. You know I really enjoy what I do; it means that we can do these things, we can have this house, we can have this food, you can do this but it's a means to an end as well as being something I like to do. But I have no choice. I have to come to work. So – but I do have a choice, 'cos I could go on the dole I suppose, but it's not a real choice is it? It's not a real choice.

If respondents differed or were ambivalent about the practical choices open to them, they also differed or felt ambivalent about the business of organising childcare. In particular, they were divided as to whether the kind of informal childcare arrangements to which most (but not all) low-income families are obliged to turn is in fact the best kind of childcare, or whether it places unhelpful strains upon relationships with the family members or friends upon whom they rely:

For me personally, I'd rather the kids be with a member of my family whom I trust, and knows them and knows me, than, you know, to employ an outsider as a childminder and pay them X amount of money per week. I think the care is more like it's – it's just loving care isn't it: it's unconditional, you know.

If I could have, you know, like a childminder who'd come here: someone that was regular, that you just didn't have to do them a favour back. You could pay them and it'd be over and done with and you could rely on them every day. That would be – it would make my life so much less stressful.

Underlying the practical dilemmas of low-income working families, there are therefore moral dilemmas relating to the meaning of parental obligation.

Moral choices

Working parents may quite legitimately regard themselves primarily as workers, primarily as parents or as both, and to treat them uniformly as economic actors responding to economic incentives is to commit what has been called the 'rationality mistake' (Barlow et al 2000). With this in mind we asked respondents a morally loaded question: 'What is more important for you, having money to spend on your children or having time to spend with them?'. Unsurprisingly, very few respondents would admit that only money matters and, although a third of the sample played safe and said that time and money were both important (and/or that this depended on the children's age), almost half the sample said clearly that time was more important:

Time to spend with 'em. I'd give anything not to be having to work, so I could spend time for them. I kill meself over it dun' I. Always complaining about not being able to spend time with 'em I'd rather be at home. Yeah.

This tends to confirm that the pressure to seek work that is now being directed not only to lone parents but also to the partners of the unemployed may indeed amount to encouragement to pursue a course that some mothers regard as morally undesirable (cf. Ford 1996, Duncan and Edwards 1999). Significantly, the quotation above comes from a mother in a two-parent family where both partners feel it necessary to work: social policy may be in step with prevailing economic pressures and cultural expectations, but it is not necessarily in step with the aspirations or preferences of all parents. Once again it is a perceived lack of choice that sharpens the dilemma and the weight of other people's expectations:

I always hated having a childminder. I always felt torn. I always felt like crying, going off to work. Having to doosh out all that money when I should be at home. Margaret Thatcher² says we should be at home looking after our children. The social pressures on being sort of a working parent were quite hard. You were damned if you did, you were damned if you didn't sort of thing. A single parent on income support, you felt people were pointing the finger at you. If you went out to work, people were pointing the finger at you.

Some mothers handled the dilemma by restricting the amount they were prepared to work:

... it was always my intention when I had them [children] that I would work less and probably there wouldn't be so much money and that's why I work part-time Because I wouldn't offload them onto somebody else just for the little bit extra I might be able to manage to earn It's not right, and they deserve – they deserve more than that in my opinion.

Others who worked full-time felt a mixture of resentment and guilt:

Every time I read the reports at nursery I think, 'Oh I'm missing out here'. I say to them, 'Oh, I'm starting to potty train him' and they says, 'Oh, we do that as well'. I went, 'Oh, alright then. You'll probably do it a lot quicker than I will.' Well I'd like to give a – put in an input. It's like when he started walking – it's like they saw his first steps so it's little things like that.

For low-income families, economic necessity takes precedence over economic opportunity and parental duty takes precedence over parental fulfilment. The effect of economic globalisation on labour markets is associated with what Bea Cantillon has called a 'simultaneous sociological transition': a process of individualisation that frees women to enter an increasingly precarious labour market, while turning carework into something that must be either sub-contracted or borne as an additional burden (Cantillon and Van den Bosch 2000: 1-2). Recent social policy reforms contain mixed messages concerning the nature of familial responsibility. For example, recent youth justice reforms place greater responsibility on parents for the behaviour of their children (Kroll and Barrett 1995) and through such initiatives as the National Family and Parenting Institute and the Sure Start scheme (Home Office 1998, and see Moss 2000) the New Labour government aims directly to influence the standards of parenting, yet the concurrent pressure upon parents to engage with the labour market remains relentless. Parents in general and mothers in particular are required to

negotiate their moral priorities and social responsibilities in a complex ideological climate.

Ideological discourses

Respondents were by and large quite well engaged with the general policy debate about whether or not it is a good idea to get as many parents as possible out to work. More than half (25) thought it was a good idea, although some only subject to provisos that parents – and here they generally meant mothers – should not be required to work until their children were older or that they should only be expected to work part-time. The Blairite language of rights and responsibilities is clearly permeating popular discourse:

I'm saying that people that can work should go out to work for a couple of hours even – 'cos its not fair on other people

It is a good idea. At the end of the day people [that] just stay on Income Support they're not bothered to improve themselves or the children and basically just take everything for granted.

About the single parent thing and getting them out to work, I think getting them out to work is a good idea to an extent because it does improve your self-esteem and it gives you – you know, just broadening your horizons is a good thing.

However, well over a third of the sample insisted that getting parents out to work was not necessarily a good thing; it is important that people should want to go to work:

I think if they're happy to do it, if they feel they can cope with it, but I don't think parents should be pressed into it, 'cos I could see if my circumstances were completely different – if I didn't have family nearby, etc. and I wasn't happy with the childcare arrangements in the area, then I wouldn't be happy to leave my children no matter how much anybody tried to pressure me into going back to work ...

If they want to, yes. Then there has to be good childcare. It's this sort of almost insisting that everybody goes to work that I'm a bit wary [of]. It seems like a police state to me: you know, that you're going to get punished if you don't.

The discursive repertoires on which people draw in their reactions to welfare reform are complex (see Dean with Melrose 1999) and respondents were able to combine support for the principle of working parenthood with often quite deep-seated concerns. The general thrust of government policy is that the best way to manage the economic risks to which families are subject is for them to engage with the labour market. However, this is not best achieved by compulsion. The protectionist welfare state of the Keynesian era enjoyed a measure of popular support often in spite of its *dirigiste* tendencies, because it was perceived as providing a degree of material security. There is a danger that if the state should offer less security while attempting none the less to change people's behaviour, it will jeopardise the trust that people have in welfare systems. The social security system is neither an effective nor an appropriate way of regulating labour market behaviour (Dean 2000, Cantillon and Van den Bosch 2000).

A similar point emerges from a recent evaluation of Britain's experimental 'New Deals' for lone mothers and disabled people which has observed that the

positive and supportive role played by New Deal Personal Advisers in assisting those who *wanted* to access the labour market ‘may have gone some way towards persuading lone parents and disabled people that these programmes are meant to help, not to harm, them and so have helped to restore some trust in government towards them. Compulsion could put that at risk.’ (Millar 2000: 39). Our evidence would tend to suggest that this conclusion has validity within a broader context. New Labour’s objective with regard to the promotion of working parenthood could work with the grain of popular aspirations, but it must also take account of popular fears that stem from the insecurities that low-income parents face in an increasingly predatory labour market and from the tensions they experience between differently constituted notions of parental obligation.

Conclusions

The intentions implied by New Labour’s welfare-to-work agenda might be regarded as radically supportive not necessarily of a dual worker family model, but an ‘individualised adult worker model’, though, as Jane Lewis (2000) has pointed out, to be effective this would need to be underpinned by collective supports for unpaid carework in the form of cash and/or services to an extent and on a scale that the government does not at present contemplate. In the meantime, as we have observed, the transition from full-time mother or ‘homemaker’ to working parent can be in many ways problematic. People by and large accept the trend to working parenthood, but the pressure that is being applied for mothers in particular to return to work does not necessarily accommodate a deeply rooted ambivalence in popular opinion. What is more, just as the experiences of young people as they effect the transition from education to the labour market are becoming increasingly polarised (Coles 2000), so indeed are the life-course transitions experienced by mothers when they (re)enter the labour market. In spite of the efforts of the New Labour government, it would appear that the gap between the incomes of the richest and the poorest families in Britain continues to widen (Gordon, et al 2000), while the disparity between the quality of ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ employment – or, in the popular vernacular, between ‘career’ jobs and ‘crap’ jobs (see Lloyd 1999) – remains as stark as ever. There is therefore a world of difference between the experience of those women who re-enter career jobs, and those that seek to supplement their family income by taking low-paid and often precarious jobs at the periphery of the labour market. No fewer than four members of our interview sample, by the time we spoke to them, had either left their employment or were about to leave because of intolerant, inflexible or ‘macho’ attitudes on the part of their employers to the needs of employees with parental responsibilities: for them, the transition to work would be a cyclical process as they moved from job to job.

Ironically, the advances that have been achieved by career women appear to have generated a backlash in so far that, according to *Management Today* (.....), many childless executives are now resentful of the childcare subsidies, leave entitlements and other ‘perks’ enjoyed by those of their colleagues whose ‘lifestyle choices’ extend to having children. The objection may appear in the circumstances trivial, or just selfish, but its logic is dangerous. It implies that only those who can afford to do so should choose to become parents. More seriously, perhaps, current employment policies do run the risk of further exacerbating gender inequalities and a recent report by the Industrial Society (Reeves 2000) has rightly urged that any

further development of statutory maternity rights must be matched by a commensurate development in the rights of fathers, since employers might otherwise become increasingly reluctant to engage women. Less obvious however is the risk identified above that such policies might exacerbate class inequalities. This is an issue where gender and class interests intersect.

The ideal of working parenthood or, using Lewis' term, of an individualised adult worker model is capable of attracting some complex and unusual political alliances. Just as the principle of parental responsibility that underpinned legislation such as the 1990 Child Support Act appealed to a number of different ideological constituencies that would otherwise be opposed (Dean 1995), so, albeit for slightly different reasons, does the principle of working parenthood. It is potentially attractive to liberal feminists, libertarian socialists and neo-liberals, but unattractive to welfare feminists, 'ethical' socialists and neo-conservatives. It is a principle that elevates formal freedom in the labour market above 'traditional' family values. The key questions are: to what extent must the interdependencies that are associated with the fulfilment of parental responsibility be situated within an exploitative familial context?; and to what extent does working motherhood trade familial dependency for economic exploitation? A resolution to the first question requires a transformation within gendered relations of dependency; a resolution to the second a transformation within capitalist relations of exploitation. Social policy by itself cannot make working parenthood compatible with parental responsibility, but it could go much further than at present. This would entail making sure, on the one hand, that men have the same incentives as women to combine employment and parental responsibilities and, on the other, that the poorest working parents have the same substantive protection in terms of access to childcare and paid leave as everybody else.

Notes

- 1 The 'old' West Germany – prior to re-unification – is cited here as an example of the classic 'Bismarkian' welfare state. In East Germany, childcare provision had been universal.
- 2 It is striking that, although this interview was conducted 10 years after Margaret Thatcher had been Prime Minister, her name should still be invoked to characterise the view that mothers should stay at home.

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Table 1: Social attitudes to working parenthood

	Britain 1988	Britain 1994	W. Germany 1994	Sweden 1994
Proportion agreeing that: 'Both the man and the woman should contribute to the household income'	53%	60%	63%	80%
Proportion disagreeing that: 'Having children interferes too much with the freedom of parents'	62%	67%	43%	71%
Proportion agreeing that: A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work'	58%	63%	72%	64%

Source: International Social Survey Programme, reported in Scott et al 1998