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Managing work-life tensions in the neo-liberal UK

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Managing work life tensions In the neo-liberal UK

A defining feature of contemporary societies is the increase in the proportion of women taking paid employment while retaining their traditional primary responsibility for domestic work and caring. Even though there is greater symmetry between women's and men's lives, the convergence has been principally one sided, with women being partially assimilated into the largely unmodified masculinised model of working to a greater extent than men have been assimilated into the feminised world of social reproduction and care (Addis 2002).

This trend is almost universal but the context in which this altered practice materialises varies cross-nationally. States are constrained in their freedom to manage their economies and finance social policy by the growing supremacy of neoliberalism, characterised by economic deregulation, privatisation, and fiscal discipline. Likewise firms are compelled to operate within the intensely competitive global market, which shapes their internal working patterns and practices. Even so, states operate within this common global framework in very different ways. Working practices, employment regulations, support for childcare, social norms and moral beliefs regarding the respective roles of women and men vary considerably across Europe reflecting the continued existence of different gendered welfare regimes and varieties of capitalism with different labour market, employment, economic and social policies. These differentiated contexts affect the relative positioning of women and men in the labour market and the ease with which paid work and caring can be combined, something for which women retain primary responsibility and generally continue to bear the costs.

This chapter focuses on the UK. It first provides an overview of the relations between the state, market and family, paying particular attention to the contemporary period of austerity. It then refers to some empirical work which the author carried out independently and with others to illustrate how these macro level relations and policies are experienced in everyday life but in different ways depending on social position, focusing mainly on gender, social class and migrant status. It

concludes by making reference to an alternative approach to austerity at the macro level that would not only better enable everyone including lone parents to manage work and caring more effectively but also benefit the economy more widely.

The UK state, austerity and welfare reforms

The UK has been characterised by neoliberalism since the 1980s, a characteristic which has been strengthened in the period following the financial crisis of 2008. The hallmark of this approach is the emphasis placed on market solutions and a reduced role for the state, at least with respect to labour market regulation and welfare support, thereby making individuals and families increasingly responsible for their own well-being. These characteristics do not simply belong to the political right as in the Thatcherism of the 1980s and early 1990s, the Coalition government of 2010-2015 and especially the Conservative government from 2015-2020,¹ but were also found in the Labour party years of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown from 1997 until 2010, albeit in a less extreme form.

Gordon Brown, when Chancellor of the Exchequer, captured this philosophy in his 2003 Budget speech when he claimed that: 'the modern route – indeed, I believe, the only route – to full employment for all regions and nations is to combine flexibility with fairness' (Brown 2003, para 281). At that time he maintained that Britain leads in job creation and suggested that the British strategy 'could help Europe's 15 million unemployed.' While he conceded that Britain has learned from Europe by introducing new maternity rights and paternity pay, he emphasised the importance of 'striking the balance between dynamism and social standards' and between 'rights and responsibilities,' encapsulated in the slogan 'work for those who can, security for those who cannot' (Hyde et al. 1999). What is perhaps different in the contemporary period is that the 'security of those who cannot' is also increasingly under threat and more over they are being demonised as being workshy, undeserving and sponging on hardworking Britons.

The Coalition and present Conservative government's took up the idea of 'making work pay' further in the 2013 Welfare Reform Act and subsequent Welfare Reform and Work Act of 2016 by introducing a series of measures to ensure that people could not obtain more income from being 'on welfare' than from working. These included a cap (i.e. an upper limit) on the amount of income any individual or family could receive in benefits. In addition, a 'Bedroom Tax' was levied on working-age people in social housing with a 'spare' bedroom, again to ensure that people relying on benefits were not enjoying better living conditions than those dependent on their incomes from paid employment. This tax had particularly adverse consequences for people with disabilities requiring overnight stays for carers and for those with complex childcare arrangements following divorce or separation – so with different numbers of children in the house at different times. In addition the rules governing the benefit process were extended and codified in a 'Claimant Commitment' which included a range of punitive sanctions for minor deviations such as for missing appointments, even when the information about these was delayed. Between 2012 and 2015 2.8 million cases of deviation were made (that is against approximately 25% of all those receiving benefits, excluding pensioners) and sanctions – including the loss of benefits, in extreme cases for up to 3 years, were imposed on 1.8 million people (DWP 2016). If benefits were withdrawn the only recourse people had was to a state hardship fund and various charities such as food banks, the use of which has increased significantly (Trussell Trust 2015). In addition to welfare cuts, government services have been cut and public sector employment has been reduced (from 6.3m to 5.3m ONS 2016a) both of which have negative consequences especially for families and women. For example, many government run children's centres known as Sure Start have been closed or services cut (Lupton 2015) as well as refuges for survivors of domestic violence. On a more positive note in 2016 the government introduced the new Living Wage in order to try and reduce low pay and make people less dependent on welfare payments. Undoubtedly this will benefit low income workers and women in particular but the Government set the level of this New Living Wage considerably below that long campaigned for by the Living Wage Foundation. As a consequence, given that many women and lone parents in

particular tend to work short hours on a range of flexible and precarious contracts, including zero hours, even though the hourly pay will be greater, the potential gains are estimated to be more than offset by the cuts in benefits (Hood 2015) given the lack of sufficient accessible and affordable childcare.

These welfare reforms have been introduced as part of the Post 2010 government's deficit and debt reduction strategy in response to the 2008 economic crisis when large sums of public money were spent on 'bailing out the banks'. The source of the public debt was soon forgotten and replaced by the idea that the previous Labour government had been profligate with public money and more generally that the country had built up too much debt – all encapsulated by the slogan that Britain had 'maxed out its credit card' (Cameron 2008) and it was essential to 'tighten our belts' and pay off the debt. The Government claimed 'we are all in this together' (Cameron 2010) with the implication that everyone would bear the costs equally. At the same time there was a second agenda to support hardworking families – the 'doers, makers and savers' and take action against the so-called 'shirkers' or the 'skivers' in order to prevent them from benefitting from the work of others (Osborne 2014). Hence the welfare cuts and penalties imposed on those believed not to be contributing – creating social division and echoing past distinctions between the 'deserving and underserving poor.'

This aspect of the policy could in one sense be regarded as successful as detailed studies show that there has been a clear shift in distribution away from benefit claimants and towards tax payers. Analysis also shows that the losers were primarily lone parent families, large families, children, and middle-aged people (at the age when many are parents) and the gainers included two-earner couples, and those in their 50s and early 60s. Further, the overall changes were regressive as the 'bottom half of the distribution lost (with the poorest groups losing most as a proportion of their incomes) while the top half gained, 'with the exception of most of the top 5 per cent' (De Agostini, Hills and Sutherland 2014:5; WBG 2016a). This analysis is supported by a specifically gender analysis which finds that 78.9 per cent of the cuts in welfare have fallen on and will continue to fall on

women, especially lone parents and ethnic minorities (House of Commons Library Research 2015). Given the uneven impact of austerity clearly, 'we are not all in this together' (Cameron 2009; Osborne 2012) as the government claimed and the costs have been borne most intensively by people least able to do so and for whom the welfare state was originally created. More generally there has been no positive impact on the economy as a whole. Economic growth remains low and even though the deficit has fallen, public debt continues to rise. Yet the austerity agenda and need for cuts continues to be accepted by mainstream economists and the wider general public and only questioned by groups on the political left campaigning against the cuts and by heterodox and feminist economists.

The economic rationale for austerity policies is questioned by Keynesian, heterodox and feminist economists (Krugman 2013; Skidelski 2013 and for a review see Perrons and Plomien 2013), and there is little evidence to suggest that austerity policies have been effective in reducing government debt and restoring growth. While the deficit has fallen from 9.7% in 2010 to 5.7% GDP in 2014, public debt has risen continually from 71.4% to 87.5% GDP (ONS 2016b) and levels of economic growth remain low. Victoria Chick (2016) asks whether this represents a failure by the government to achieve their stated objectives or a 'feint' by which she means a disguise or a ploy to secure a hidden objective – which in this case is simply to reduce the size of the welfare state. In fact the government has made this latter objective explicit as they referred to a specific target of reducing the size of government expenditure to 35% of GDP (Gov.UK 2014) – which, if it were to happen, would be the lowest in the European Union (Eurostat 2016) and equivalent to levels last seen in the 1930s, that is, before the development of the Welfare State. Clearly, the Conservative Government is intensifying neoliberalism (Grimshaw and Rubery 2012) and attempting to make the self-regulating market the organizing principle of society, despite all of the pitfalls and horrendous conditions endured by working people living through the Great Depression of the 1930s and before that in the 19th century, prior to any welfare provisions other than the Poor houses (Polanyi 1953).

If state expenditure was reduced in this way, then the UK really would be a very different society from today and the well-being of lower income people, women, children and the wellbeing of the elderly would be even more threatened than they already are being -as the increasing use of foodbanks, even in the most affluent locations – such as Cobham in Surrey – South East England,ⁱⁱ indicates. Furthermore gender equality would be severely undermined. Women have benefitted significantly from the presence of a supportive state, by working in the public sector, drawing more directly than men on public services and more likely than men to need welfare support given the continuing uneven division of the domestic division of labour and childcare and the persistent gender pay and pension gaps, which are among the widest in Europe.

Work and family in the flexible UK labour market

Hopefully this turn towards a purer market based society will not happen, but already people are increasingly dependent on the market for their incomes and employment has increased as a consequence. The proportion of working families is higher than ever before (a family being defined as ‘a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child’ and a working family as one that ‘contains at least one person aged 16 and over and in employment’ ONS 2015:1). Mothers of young children are much more likely to be in employment than they were two decades ago (65% of those with children aged 4 in 2014 compared to just 47% in 1996) (Azmat 2015) and the participation rate of lone mothers has also increased from just over 40% to just over 60% in the last two decades, though remains lower than partnered parents, especially when children are young (LSE Commission 2015).

As a consequence the gender employment gap has narrowed from 39% in 1971 to just 10% in 2014 meaning that 68% of women compared to 78% of men are now in employment. The difference among women between those with and without children has also narrowed (ONS 2015). This shift can be attributed to a combination of different trends and processes: women’s increasing educational qualifications and wish to develop careers, the increasing need and desire to contribute

to household income given the decline in the real value of male median earnings in the lower deciles (Cribb and Joyce 2015); greater relationship instability and new styles of living, especially single person households and most recently the increase in the state pension age. In addition, as we have seen, the welfare reforms encourage people to move into paid work, especially lone mothers.

Superficially these statistics indicate a harmonious balance between the interests of the state for higher levels of employment and the market for a wage labour force and, in the sense of greater parity in labour force participation rates, gender equality has also increased. However gender segregation remains, as does the gender pay gap, and women are over represented in part time, low paid and precarious work (LSE Commission 2015). Given the increase in this form of employment, paid employment is no longer a guaranteed route to a living income despite the introduction of the 'New Living Wage' referred to above.

The UK also has a significant care deficit which in the context of the prevailing gender division of domestic labour limits the labour market opportunities of women, except for those on very high incomes who are able to pay for their own private solutions through the market. Compared to other EU countries the level of public provision of childcare is comparatively low and the costs are comparatively high, taking up 40% of a couples income compared to an OECD average of 17% (assuming the parents have a combined income of 150% average wage - OECD 2015) and childcare costs have been rising in the UK much faster than earnings in the last five years (Family and Child Care Trust 2015). Even though the Labour Government launched the National Childcare Strategy in 1998, coverage was not comprehensive and neither was it intended to be. Informal care combined with flexible working figured prominently in this strategy. Likewise although the 2015 Conservative government has promised to double the amount of free childcare to 30 hours a week for working parents of children aged 3 to 4 years from 2017, a gap for younger children remains and state paid maternity or paternity leave is very short, though private firms and organisations often pay higher amounts and for longer periods especially for professional workers. Moreover, child care providers

have expressed concerns that the level of government funding for childcare places is insufficient to cover the cost of providing the current free hours of care, the shortfall being made up by parents who pay for additional hours of care, who will clearly pay less when the number of free hours is extended further (Rutter 2016). These difficulties have been compounded by the introduction of the New Living Wage which is clearly warranted given the vital role they play and even with which childcare workers will remain among the low paid. What this highlights, and a similar argument applies to elder care, is the difficulty of providing care given its inherently labour intensive character by the private sector through the market for those on median earnings and below (Himmelweit 2007). As William Baumol (1967 and Baumol and 2012) point out with respect to a wider range of labour intensive activities this is a social question about the distribution of resources not an irresolvable problem. The fact that other countries choose to provide childcare in other ways and with greater levels of state support, as in the Nordic case, substantiates these theoretical arguments.

Overall, the structure of childcare matches the neoliberal agenda of provision through the market – on the grounds of maximising parental choice. But as with all market solutions the extent of choice depends very much on income and it is not possible for individuals to choose to have high quality local state provision for all. What the government forgets is that there are external social benefits associated with good quality care, discussed further in the final section, and such provision is essential if the government is serious about its commitment to closing the gender pay gap within this generation (Gov.UK 2015).

The UK is therefore unusual in the sense of having quite a high female employment rate, limited childcare facilities and long working hours for men and especially fathers. The question is then how do people manage work life relations in these circumstances and how do different people manage these relationships and the competing expectations between being fully committed workers and being hands on parents. Susan Himmelweit and Maria Sigala (2004:455) suggest that this ‘circle is squared’ through mothers working short part-time hours fitted around their children’s care, a

situation made possible by the highly flexible UK labour market. Delving deeper however, suggests that while this interpretation describes the aggregate picture, in practice the outcomes vary by social class in ways that are likely to increase inequality in a country where inequality is already very high and gender inequality deeply entrenched.

Managing work and family at the micro level

To illustrate these variations by social class and to consider how the tensions between the state, market and family in the UK are resolved differently at the micro household level this section draws on some particular cases from two qualitative studies carried out in the 2000s in London in which the author participated. First I set out the context of the research and then make reference to particular cases from these studies to show how people in different social situations combine paid work with caring in a situation with a highly flexible and unequal labour market and where there is little direct public provision and overall support for child care.

Managing work and family in London – a global city

London is the richest region in the European Union and over 50% richer than any other UK region in terms of GDP per capita. It is a global city (Sassen 2010) and so houses the strategic functions of many global corporations and contains all the high level professional services, including the major law, accounting and finance firms, many of these being global corporations themselves as well as housing the key functions of government. To manage their operations and working lives these firms and organisations as well as their very highly paid workers require a whole host of services in a wide range of sectors including catering, cleaning, security, transport and delivery as well as personal services such as gyms, dry cleaning and hairdressing, some of which have a high migrant density and typically workers are far lower paid than the people who buy their services.

Saskia Sassen (2010: 32-33) argues that these cities form the crucial infrastructure for the 'specialised servicing, financing, and management of global economic processes' [and] 'all key components of this infrastructure need to function like clockwork.' This infrastructure includes the households of the professional workforce, many of whom are dual earner, leading to the proliferation of 'households without a "wife" and more precisely, the mix of functions this subject represents.' Given the long hours of work and high levels of responsibility these workers have Sassen maintains that it is critical that these workers feel 'good and at top of one's form' [and] 'more often than not this includes traditional notions of family life, with children, pets, plants, dinner-at-home included.' So the 'disappearing 'wife' in the urbanised professional household, i.e. this 'absent historical-cultural subject of the "wife"..... potentially becomes a crisis, not just for the household, but for the advanced economic system.' For this reason Sassen argues that it is critical not simply to note the return of the serving classes and the development of a global care chain and 'their poor working conditions, exploitation and multiple vulnerabilities' but also to recognise their analytical role as 'strategic infrastructure maintenance workers' who she argues should be 'valued correspondingly.'

Currently their strategic role is rarely recognised and while their importance may be acknowledged and professional workers may speak glowingly of their nannies and fitness trainers neither this appreciation nor their strategic significance is represented in their pay. So global cities such as London are marked by very wide earnings inequalities and social divisions which are also gendered – as the high level professional workers and bankers especially at the top levels in these organisations are disproportionately male and moreover stereotypically feminised domestic and service tasks in childcare or catering are typically paid less than stereotypically masculinised roles in transport or household maintenance and repair (Kilkey, Perrons and Plomien 2013). Further, when alternative measures of well-being are used, taking into account inequality then London is no longer the best performing region in the UK and when gender inequality is counted then London becomes the worst region of all (Perrons and Dunford 2013). So just as the wealthiest people live in London so too do

some of the poorest. Indeed, 27% of the population (2.25 million) live in poverty compared to 20% elsewhere in the UK and 1.2 million of these are defined as in-work poor, that is when someone in the household is in paid employment but nonetheless the household falls below the poverty threshold (i.e. with a household equivalised income of less than 60% of the median).ⁱⁱⁱ In the 10th decile, total household wealth is £6,300 per capita compared to £1.1million in the 90th decile (figures for the most wealthy and very poorest decile are considered statistically unreliable) but even so the 90:10 wealth ratio is 173 in London compared to 60 elsewhere in the UK – making London a truly divided region (NPI 2015). The first study below refers to a high level professional worker on a top income, and to two other household's that arguably play a strategic role in running the global city but whose earnings are insufficient to maintain their livelihoods and considers the different ways in which these households manage the combination of paid work and caring.

The first empirical study I draw on was carried out at the turn of the century and entitled *Living and Labouring in London and Manchester* by researchers based in these two cities.^{iv} The main research objective was to consider how parents of young children, in particular mothers, managed their work life balance in different areas of these cities. The overall study was qualitative and based on in depth interviews (over 50 in London) with partnered mothers, the vast majority of whom were in heterosexual relationships. Here I am just selecting contrasting experiences from the London part of the study to illustrate how both labour market flexibility and the complexities of managing work life balance vary according to social class and income.

Complexities of life at the top

The first case is a finance specialist who worked for one of the global finance corporations, who I will call Sandra. Sandra's partner also worked in finance and they had a young daughter. Both worked long hours, averaging 60 per week, and Sandra had to travel some weekends as part of her work.^v The firm had all the expected equalities and diversity policies and while Sandra could have asked for reduced hours given her parental responsibilities she considered that these equality and family

friendly policies were primarily for secretaries rather than for high level career oriented workers such as herself. In addition the firm provided a whole range of concierge services on site including a designer café, restaurant, dry cleaners, dentist, physiotherapist, nurse and gym as well as an emergency crèche. They also provided a 'house sitting' service so people did not have to wait in at home for deliveries or while house repairs were carried out. It was not entirely clear whether these services were available to all employees or just the elite – but the purpose was to ensure that key employees maximised the time spent at their desks and minimised the time away for necessary social reproduction. For example, if a dental service was needed it would only take the time of the treatment as waiting and travelling times were eliminated by the in-house service provision. Sandra and her partner also employed a nanny for about 55 hours a week and while they paid her an above average carer's wage they were still left with over 85% of their combined income (which contrasts with the average UK figure referred to earlier where people would only be left with 60% - and almost certainly for a lower quantity of care. Sandra and partner also employed a cleaner and Sandra lived within 2 km of her office which enabled her to avoid long travelling times and either walk to work for exercise or take a taxi when needed. So while her working hours were long and she did a larger share of caring than her partner she nonetheless found that while life involved a lot of juggling she was nonetheless able to combine a high level job in corporate finance with having a young child, though she wondered whether current arrangements would be so manageable if she had another child. She was also concerned that her work colleagues thought she left work early (even though this was 6.30 or 7 in the evening – her day generally starting at 7.30 or 8). Sandra did not say how much she earned but given her job and the firm it would almost certainly be in the upper half of the top decile; her contract was negotiated by her own employment lawyer (Perrons 2005).

Managing at the margins

Living close by Sandra in social housing was Cara, a single parent with 3 children who worked part time in a local supermarket. Cara, fitted the model identified by Himmelweit and Sigala (204) and

worked short flexible hours around her caring commitments. She had a contract for a minimum of 16 hours of work per week, with a commitment to work up to 24 hours if asked to do so. Similarly to other people we interviewed Cara welcomed the opportunity of being able to work flexibly even though she was aware that in general the firm often benefitted more than she did from such arrangements by being able to match the labour supply to fluctuations in shopping patterns. In Cara's case her hours varied from week to week often at short notice, sometimes approximating full time work yet when it came to sick or holiday pay Cara only received a wage for the basic 16 hours. This variation in hours made her claims for social benefits complicated. For as long as Cara's children require care it is difficult to see how her situation would change; her caring commitments constrain her ability to work and the low pay and irregular working patterns mean that it is difficult for her to pay for any care. Only radical changes to the earnings of workers in these necessary, but currently very low paid jobs together with a more comprehensive childcare provision would make change improve her situation. Now, twelve years after the interviews, it is possible that Cara would have benefitted from the new living wage and the additional hours for free childcare (at least for the time when her children were aged 3 or 4 years further on. At the same time she might have been subject to the cuts associated with the welfare reforms of 2013 and 2016 that reduced welfare payments and introduced the bedroom tax, referred to earlier and additionally suffer from the move towards approximating market rents for social housing, which in London would be very high. New research is required to explore how differently situated people are managing in the currently more austere times.

A final case from this study relates to a married couple with three children who followed the one and a half earner model. They both worked in low paid service jobs and similarly to Cara had to rely on the welfare benefits to boost their low pay to a minimum survival level. Melissa worked part time as a nursery nurse on a fixed term contract and fitted her working hours around school times which varied owing to the age distribution of the children. It was difficult for her to work longer as Fred her husband worked varied shifts as a full time railway engineer for the privatised rail track company. His

shifts varied by the times of the day and days of the week and overtime seemed to be both unpredictable and almost compulsory. A further constraint on Melissa's working pattern was having to negotiate travel between home, work and school via public transport – a situation very different from Sandra's, the highly paid finance worker who could afford to live close to her work in the centre of London and pay for private transport whenever necessary and have a private nanny.

Even though Cara, Melissa and Fred all played vital roles in the City's infrastructure, ensuring others could buy their groceries, providing childcare and enabling people to travel safely by mending the railway track, and arguably should also feel good and be at the 'top of one's form' (Sassen 2010: 33) they all appeared to be very stressed. Rather than being able to enjoy the pleasures of traditional family life as identified by Sassen (2010: 33) they had to manage the complexities of juggling their work–life situations with little reproductive support, no spare cash to ease their position by buying in commoditised services and were dependent on public transport for negotiating travel between their different roles. Their different situations raise questions about how different types of work are recompensed as well as about how childcare could be better organised and provided. These case studies also indicate how inequalities are both reproduced and experienced across a whole range of areas of life.

The missing husband and migrant handymen

Saskia Sassen (2010) refers to absence of the 'historical-cultural subject of the 'wife' and specifically the functions this subject played in providing the family life style that made people 'feel good' and able to work in the highly demanding high level professional work. The second study I draw on here is 'Situating men within global care chains: the migrant handyman phenomenon.'^{vi} One aspect of this study looked at the absence of the 'historical-cultural subject' of the husband and how the stereotypical role they played in household maintenance and gardening was in some cases filled by migrant handymen. The research focus was primarily London, the migrant handymen came mainly from Poland, and the households (with at least one dependent child) were primarily professional

and managerial workers. For a full account of this study which was situated within the broader context of globalisation, migration and social reproduction see Kilkey et.al (2013).

The idea of the absent husband has been recognised commercially by the growth of service firms supplying handyman services with names such as 'Dial', 'Rent' or 'Hire' a 'Hubby.' These firms provided the services the husband either can't or won't do. Some of these firms are quite large, even multinational, and many operate primarily by providing a web portal to bring together the suppliers, (typically very small firms many consisting of one handyman) with the households buying the services. Apart from electricians and gas engineers no formal qualifications are required for this work that consists primarily of household maintenance and repair. Depending on their linguistic ability the migrants found it relatively easy to set up as handymen and in most cases used the skills they had acquired simply by growing up in Poland and were surprised that men in the UK seemed to lack similar ability. The UK fathers explained that they outsourced this work because they wanted to be good fathers and spend the little free time they had with their children rather than putting up shelves and decorating, especially when they could easily afford to pay someone else to do that work. In this way they were able to participate in some aspects of family life that Sassen (2010) argues contributes to professional's sense of well-being.

There is no doubt that the fathers shared the aspirations to be hands on caring parents in contrast to their own rather more distant fathers and yet at the same time they rarely questioned their long working hours. Rather they enjoyed their working lives considering work formed an important part of their masculine identity. In general they spent the weekends at home and would contribute to childcare as well as in some cases undertaking specific time bound roles during the week – such as managing breakfast and taking the children to nursery or school. The women by contrast were much more likely to moderate their working hours and not only did they retain primary responsibility for managing the household they also made the arrangements regarding the

handymen. For these reasons we suggest that gender relations had changed but not been transformed.

This kind of solution is possible for the high earning professional classes but arguably it contributes to consolidating class divisions and classed ability to play an active fathering role among men, just as Joan Tronto (2002) argues that employing nannies consolidated differences between women and raised the question as to whether growing economic inequalities and corresponding increasing demand for domestic services and childcare have resulted in a division of labour that undermines feminist notions of justice and the further question as to whether a feminist can employ a nanny (Tronto, 2002: 35). This study illustrated a parallel difference between men. One particularly moving case was when a handyman referred to the way in which the boundaries of his handyman job expanded in one particular household to childcare. He recounted one occasion when he was asked to assemble a child's toy just before Christmas and saying wistfully that he wished he had time to do this for his own children (Kilkey et al 2013). This illustration also demonstrates how in a predominantly market society people find their own resolutions to work life balance but in very different ways depending on their social position. In this case both the householders and the migrant handymen consider they gain from the arrangement. The professional fathers are able to manage the conflicting expectations between working long hours and being hands-on nurturing parents and the migrant handymen able to earn more money to support their households than they would have been able to in Poland but this can mean seeing little of their own children.

Conclusion

The UK is a highly unequal country in which market solutions are becoming increasingly prominent. The welfare state is being cut back and people have to resolve work life balance problems for themselves. Drawing on two studies carried out in the 2000s this Chapter has provided some illustrations of how differently situated individuals resolved these problems but in ways that are likely to reinforce existing inequalities.

The ostensible justification for cutting the welfare state is to reduce public debt but even though it has not yet been effective the argument that austerity policies are necessary to pay off the debt has proved to be persuasive among the general population. There are however evidenced based alternatives that are more likely to lead to economic growth, reduce debt, promote gender equality and help resolve the care deficit.

Feminists have long argued for more state support for child and elder care in order to counter the gender division of domestic labour that forms a key obstacle to gender equality. New analysis by the UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) for the International Trade Union Congress (ITUC 2016) finds that an alternative approach to austerity based fundamentally on the Keynesian idea that at times of low growth it is necessary for the public sector to step in via investment to reboot the economy. When this solution is proposed government's tend to turn to investment in physical infrastructure such as roads and bridges which are thought to yield long term benefits. However the WBG (2016b) analysis shows that the comparative impact of investing in social or physical infrastructure and find that while both would be preferable to austerity, the investment in social infrastructure is more effective. Specifically the study estimated the impact of investing 2% of GDP in both physical infrastructure (construction) and social infrastructure (childcare and elder care) and finds that the investment in social infrastructure would generate more jobs and contribute to a higher level of economic growth than either following existing austerity policies or by investing in physical infrastructure. In addition investment in social infrastructure would help to resolve the caring deficit which is an important barrier to greater gender equality and yield long term benefits in terms of well nurtured children. However, to recognise the value of this perspective public policies need to be gender mainstreamed and government budgets need to be accompanied by sophisticated gender and equalities impact statements. Only by so doing will some of the tensions between state, market and family life be articulated if not resolved. Clearly implementing alternative gender friendly policies depends on political will which requires both evidenced based analysis and effective campaigning.

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ⁱ In the UK Governments are now elected on a fixed term of 5 years.

ⁱⁱ For more information see Cobham Area Foodbank: available at: <http://cobhamarea.foodbank.org.uk/>

ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of the different measures of poverty and their limitations see European Parliament (2015).

^{iv} This study was carried out with Linda McDowell (the principal investigator) Collette Fagan, Kath Ray and Kevin Ward with ESRC research award grant R000239470) – it resulted in a number of papers including McDowell et. al (2005) where there is a full account of the broader context and methodology.

^v I refer to these cases in Perrons (2005),

^{vi} This study was carried out with Majella Kilkey (the principal investigator) and Ania Plomien with ESRC research award grant RES-000–22–2590