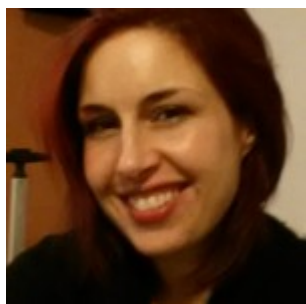


Work at all costs? the gendered impact of Universal Credit on lone-parent and low-paid families



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Last week's shock Conservative victory in the House of Commons has been swiftly followed by the reaffirmation of a **commitment to sweeping welfare reforms** (following a pre-election pledge by Ian Duncan Smith, now reappointed as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to cut twelve billion pounds from the welfare budget over the term of the new government). Duncan was **behind the original launch in 2010** of the former Coalition Government's beleaguered flagship welfare system, Universal Credit (UC), **now being rolled out across a limited number of local authorities in the UK**. Long before it has made significant national impact on claimants, it has already faced widespread criticism from **women's groups, landlords and Gingerbread, the single parent advocacy group**, to name but a few. A Labour-led government would not have reversed governmental commitment to the system, and had **promised only to 'pause' it**; it will be remembered that Coalition welfare reforms followed an existing pattern of 'labour market activation', privatisation of state functions and 'responsibilisation' **begun under the New Labour governments of 1997 onwards**. Rather, we can see UC as the culmination of a quintessentially neoliberal form of welfare governance. UC represents a massive regulatory experiment, attempting a type of sweeping **'algorithmic regulation'** whereby the tax and pay information of claimants, as well as, potentially, their job-searching activity, can be continually surveyed (although the online jobsearch requirement, originally imagined as centred around the Universal Jobmatch website, has **already fallen foul of common sense** on many points). UC also mandates new forms of behavioural demands on claimants, out of work or not: the new **Claimant Commitment** requires 'workless' claimants to devote a full 35 hour week to evidenced jobsearching, overlooked by their 'work coach' (JobCentrePlus advisor). In a new development known as in-work conditionality, UC requires claimants receiving less than the amount of a minimum wage job at 35 hours per week to seek **'more or better paid work'** – and the jobsearch and evidence requirements will also apply to them. A 'randomised controlled trial' of different types of incentive for these new 'part-workless' **has just been launched**; one group is to be summoned to 'challenging' interviews after 2 months of not earning 'enough'. If deemed not to be making the required effort to get paid more or work more hours, both working *and* 'workless' claimants face lengthy **sanctions or workfare**. The gender impact of this situation is clear, although largely ignored in publication and discussion within recent Governments, which tends to avoid mention of single motherhood altogether, preferring to talk about more positive-sounding issues such as family stability. So keen is Ian Duncan Smith to link the 'unstable family' with social decline that he recently tried to have it instated as **an official measure of child poverty** (somewhat surprisingly, his proposed redefinition would have excluded income altogether). Despite the official

failure to acknowledge the disproportionate impact of UC reforms on women, it is undeniable. Because women comprise the highest proportion of both **low-paid** and **part time workers**, women and less well-off couples with children (who may earn under the conditionality threshold if one partner is not working full time and the other is low paid) will be among the first in line to feel the smack of the new welfare governance.



From this brief outline alone, it is already clear that there are highly contradictory political messages implicit in the new system. Ringing indictments of worklessness and **'intergenerational poverty'** have attained a new vigour in the post-austerity era, as blame for the crisis has been very effectively diverted away from global market failure and the financial industry to the poorest members of society; such **moralising generalisations** abound in the documentation and publicity surrounding the Welfare Reform Act 2012 which brought in UC. The opprobrium historically targeted at 'bad mothers' (usually working class and single) as embodiments of national decline is now being potentially expanded to include even those **'hardworking families'** beloved of cross-party rhetoric, if they can be shown to be earning 'too little'. Thus, the injunction to mothers with children in lower-paid couples (UC is paid to a couple as a single 'benefit unit') is to go out and work as many hours as possible – and also to have fewer children, as the childcare element of tax credit has already been reduced from 80 to 70%. Media reports shrilly warn women of the potential damage caused by leaving young children in **childcare**, but it appears that only if you earn enough will you be encouraged to spend this supposedly vital formative time with your children: a parent on UC earning more than the minimum wage per hour is less likely to face discipline and surveillance, as they can work fewer hours to meet the conditionality threshold. The design of Universal Credit attempts to adapt the benefit regime to flexible work patterns, which are convenient and cheap for modern employers and have **increased dramatically in number** since austerity measures began in 2008. These usually comprise cycles of short term work with unfixed hours, also known as 'zero hour' contracts. Zero-hour employers require their employees to turn up at work when summoned; thus such contracts are 'flexible' generally only for the employer. Employers of this type are perhaps unlikely to be impressed or flexible if their part time employee is summoned to interviews or even workfare on pain of sanction by the JobCentre at times clashing with their shifts; and thus arises the surreal situation in which Lord Freud, Coalition Minister for Welfare Reform, has recently implored the business community to be understanding of its employees' need **to juggle perhaps two zero-hour jobs**. Low-paid working parents and single parents, the vast majority of whom are women, thus face a particularly harsh and clashing set of commandments from both the DWP and the workplace.

Single parents have already had their opportunities to stay at home to care for young children progressively curtailed under reforms beginning in 2008 under New Labour, and must now seek work (which can be tailored to fit in with school hours) as soon as their youngest child reaches five. Under the **Universal Credit Regulations 2013**, single parents with children over one year old must attend 'work-focussed interviews' **on pain of sanction** and will be expected to obtain full time work with a maximum commuting time of 90 minutes when their child is 13. Under **previous regulations**, 'lone parent flexibilities' allowed a limited latitude to single parents to turn down jobs which clashed with their childcare responsibilities have now been relegated to 'guidance' applicable at the discretion of the JobCentrePlus 'work coach' – who has power, it will be recalled, to sanction claimants if s/he considers that their commitments have not been met. There is another clear clash here with other forcible governmental moral injunctions under, for example, **antisocial behaviour** legislation, to demonstrate responsibility for teenagers as they become young adults. Under UC, 13 year olds from single parent families face spending weekdays from 7.30 am to 6.30 pm without their only carer. UK media and government are quick to label teenagers' antisocial behaviour, crime and truancy as signs of a 'broken society' and to point the finger of blame at 'irresponsible' parents (and notably, **absent fathers** – again lone mother-headed families are obliquely addressed as the cause of social ills). Nonetheless, the effect of the new benefits system will be to keep lone and low paid mothers away from their children for unprecedented amounts of time. Even assuming that a mother subject to, say, a **Parenting Order** to get her truanting child to school on time every day, can find or afford before- and after-school childcare for her 13 year old, will it really commence at 7 30 am, when she may have to start her commute to work? (This also assumes that the carer would be able to cajole or force the reluctant teenager into school, a task for which the full time working mother will retain full responsibility). The structural barriers to single-parent work (and particularly flexible work) are brutally clear. While an affluent family may be able to hire a nanny or house an au pair, this is not an option available even to most families earning above average wages, let alone the low-paid.



A different clash of moral and economic injunctions faces the ‘part-workless’ mother, the current claimant of Working Tax Credit and/or Childcare Tax Credit, often a member of a couple where her partner may be earning more and/or working full time, if she (like most mothers) is the primary carer for children. Families in the UK face hugely **expensive childcare** alongside an assumption that the primary carer will be available at any time to manage the child’s daily existence, illnesses, issues arising at school, etc. Tax credits have come to be relied upon by low-to-average-earning families where one partner works part time and pays for part time childcare. A woman in this situation with a youngest child over 13 will now have to be in a ‘benefit unit’ which is paid *enough* to work part time if she wants to claim UC in-work; and will be subject to surveillance and compulsory ‘work coaching’ (including, as noted, potential workfare during her ‘spare’ jobseeking time) until she gets paid ‘enough’. She could also face sanctioning for failure to take up a job opportunity with long or ‘flexible’ hours and a 90 minute commute each way, regardless of its effects on her childcare obligations.

The particular incoherence of the new in-work conditionality is that it brings broad and largely discretionary punitive and surveillance measures into a system which was not designed as an out of work benefit but constitutes a top-up for wages which are too low to allow families with children to manage financially while one or both partners is in work. Tax credit has thus subsidised employers to pay wages too low to cover relatively modest living costs. A system making working claimants responsible for ‘earning enough’ fails to acknowledge that **average UK wages have stagnated** (particularly since the onset of austerity in 2008) leading to a significant drop in real income, and that the flexible, mobile workforce envisaged by UC and the global market is not conducive to extended family care arrangements, even if family care were always available for free. We can connect the extension of neoliberal ‘responsibilisation’ rhetoric to low-paid ‘hardworking families’ to the neoliberal assumption of total private responsibility for children-expressed in such truisms as ‘if you cannot afford children then don’t have them’. Implicit in this assumption is that ‘benefit breeders’ (usually, **but not exclusively**, single working class women) are a primary social scourge, and that their children are worthless. The steady creep of the same punitive logic to working-poor families should be a matter of grave concern. In a culture where mothers in particular are not only blamed for having too many children, but for failing to spend sufficient time and energy rearing and disciplining the ones they have, the inherent cruelty of the moral confusion implicit in UK welfare reform requires urgent attention. Single mothers who have already received punitive treatment from the Department for Work and Pensions look set to suffer disproportionately from higher conditionality and lower flexibility; and in-work conditionality will be a post-election shock to many working-poor families, particularly mothers. All the gender-neutral language the Department for Work and Pensions can deploy will not negate the harsh reality of this disproportionate impact. As **Baroness Sherlock recently commented in Parliament**, ‘At the moment, if you have been on benefits and you get a job, you do not expect the department to ring you up at work saying, “Come and talk to me because you’re not working enough”. I think that people who feel that they have escaped the tender ministrations of the jobcentre are going to be a little taken aback when they find that it starts following them to work.’

May 13th, 2015 | [Politics](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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