

Gender and New Labour: after the male breadwinner model?

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Introduction

New Labour's accession marked a shift in government assumptions about gender. Under earlier Labour governments, education and health legislation had given crucial citizenship rights to women and men equally (which women seized to participate fully as citizens) while the 1970s brought equal opportunities and sex discrimination legislation. These brought women into employment and public life, but the male breadwinner model of the family lingered through aspects of Thatcher and Major government policy until 1997. Women might join the labour market, become MPs and ministers, but they should not expect government support in challenging gender relations at home, or through any national system of childcare. New Labour had new ideas about gender, with a more liberal attitude to varied family forms, a strong expectation that women's responsibilities lay in employment as well as parenting, that they should be expected to support themselves and their children and pay for their own pensions. New Labour has acknowledged the extent of change in families, and the need for women to sustain more independent employment and incomes. It developed a Work/Life Balance agenda for economic reasons, to avoid social exclusion and support families, though rarely for gender equality (Lewis and Campbell 2007a and b).

How strongly has New Labour supported gender equality? If the male breadwinner model was an inter-related system of employment, care, time, income and power, how far in practice have women been enabled to support themselves and their children through equality in employment and working time, with social support for care and gender equality in care? How does gender equality in the UK measure against Sweden, where gender equality has been a passion, and supports for dual earner families long-standing? I argue that policy for women's employment has not been matched by policies in other areas. Care has been next with Sure Start, Childcare Tax Credits and rights for pre-school children, but a long way to go before we could describe a 'universal service'. Gender inequality in time is crucial: on average, women are now only half of a one-and-a-half breadwinner model. Policies for flexible working are aimed mainly at mothers, but policies for more equal time are nowhere on the agenda. And income? The tax credit system recognizes lone mothers' needs to earn and to care for children, bringing rights as part-timers, rather than being treated either as mothers or as workers. But important change for lone mothers is balanced by potentially negative impact among partnered mothers. Women's incomes are still not equivalent to men's and few can earn themselves equality in income or pensions. New Labour has also been limited by its liberal, free-market stance. A commitment in principle to universal childcare services has not brought real public spending on the Scandinavian, or even Central European model. There are reasons to turn to social democracy, and unembarrassed public spending on childcare as the underpinning for more complete equality of citizenship in the UK.

Models of gender in social policy

How far have New Labour governments moved from the gender assumptions of the 'male breadwinner model' towards gender equality? The UK was described as a male breadwinner model in Jane Lewis' path-breaking comparative account in 1992, with policies rooted in post-war ideas of gender difference, in contrast to a modified version in France, and dual earner model developing in Sweden (Lewis 1992, 2001). Changes in

families have been accompanied by quite radical changes in assumptions underpinning policy, with New Labour committed from 1997 to enhancing women's – especially mothers' - access to employment. At the millennium, women's lifetime earnings have been measured at half men's (Rake 2000). But being the half in a one- and-a-half earner partnership exposes women to great risks. The need for independent earning grows, as decreasing marriage and increasing divorce mean women are losing security through male breadwinners: the proportion of non-employed individuals who have a partner in work decreased continuously from 76% in 1974 to 40% in 1994 and has remained at that level (Berthoud & Blekesaune 2006: 21).

The characterization of gender regimes based on the male breadwinner/dual earner spectrum (Lewis 1992) puts gender at the centre of comparative analysis and is a starting point here. Gender regimes are understood as systems of gender equality or inequality through which paid work is connected to unpaid, state services and benefits are delivered to individuals or households, costs are allocated, and time is shared between men and women in households and between households and employment. The decline of the male breadwinner model has implications for all these (Lewis 2001). But changing gender assumptions in government and society have neither brought changing practice in all these domains, nor mean that gender equality has been prioritized. New Labour gender policies are analyzed here in component parts of the male breadwinner/dual earner system: paid work, care work, time, income and power, asking to what extent policies and practices can be seen as systems of gender equality or of traditional gender roles in each part.

We should also ask about the level and nature of policy intervention. The *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Esping-Andersen 1990) are relevant to gender, because social democratic countries have had gender equality as well as social equality at their heart (Ellingsaeter & Leira 2006). Social democratic regimes have also underpinned gender equality with social policies, social spending and social commitment to parents and children. In the UK, commitment to free markets may be greater than commitment to gender equality.

Are there alternative scenarios for a more gender equal future? The idea of making men's lives more like women's is central to Fraser's Universal Caregiver model: all employees would be assumed to have care responsibilities, while developing civil society would share care more widely (Fraser 1997). But gender equality needs more systematic support, beyond the capacity of civil society. The French working time model also has something to contribute to thinking about how to turn the one and a half earner model into a two x three-quarter one in which men and women have time to care as well as to earn. Government commitments to gender equality need underpinning with regulation of time and with social investment. Comparative data clearly show social democratic countries as the most gender equal: but they have still prioritized women's employment over men's care. In a model of Universal Citizenship gender equality would go beyond paid employment – important as that has been – and attend to gender inequalities in care, time and power: men's and women's obligations to paid work and care as citizens would

be underpinned by regulating working time and electoral systems and by social investment in citizenship rights.

Gender in employment

Increasing labour market participation has been a key government policy, for social inclusion, for economic growth, for responsibility, and as a basis for citizenship rights (Lister 2002). Women have chosen paid employment too, seeking economic independence and autonomy. Increasing support for reconciling employment and family has benefited women and men. The emphasis on paid work as the only recognized work may be criticized for under-valuing unpaid care work, and for attending inadequately to the impact of care on women's independent access to earnings and pensions. We need to ask about the quality of women's work as well as the quantity. And we need to ask about gender equality. Governments everywhere hold to gender equality in principle, and pass legislation promoting it. But it often competes with other objectives, and may be little supported in practice. Have New Labour policies been underpinned by an ideology of gender equality, and how vigorously have they promoted gender equality in practice?

Women's increasing labour market participation pre-dates New Labour policies. Women have been making their own decisions for paid employment, in the absence of policies to support them. By 1997, lone mothers' labour market participation was lower than elsewhere, but employment among other mothers was high. Conservative ideological support for the family as a private domain, for a male breadwinner model and for family responsibility meant mothers were making their own policies, bringing deep divisions between those with education, able to earn to pay for childcare, and lower earners who fitted employment around care responsibilities. New Labour brought a new ideological commitment to employment and some policies intended to sustain women's participation. These include the Childcare Strategy (discussed below under care), a New Deal for lone parents, Working Tax Credits, Child Tax Credits with a childcare component. Some measures to improve the quality of employment include strengthened employment protection for parents and for part-time workers. The National Minimum Wage aimed to lift low earnings, with particular relevance to women's low earnings, while the Women's Unit was established in central government to support women's causes, including employment and pay.

The Women's Unit documenting gender differences in lifetime earnings showed women's lifetime earnings as around half men's, a practice aptly described as a one-and-a-half male breadwinner, in which women's labour market participation does not bring equality in earnings or equal domestic partnerships (Lewis 2001). The WU study showed great differences between mothers and other women, and between women with different levels of education (Rake 2000). If a study published in 2000 could be seen as describing mainly the legacy inherited by New Labour what has happened since? Have the many initiatives around work, especially women's work, brought better quality, more continuous employment? Have conditions and rewards of part-time work improved?

The undervaluation of women's work is widespread, complex and dynamic (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). Even new women graduates receive lower rates of pay than their male

counterparts, but the gap increases over time (Purcell and Elias 2004); labour markets are segregated and job hierarchies within occupations gendered; men's power is built into the male working life model, favouring male jobs and working patterns. Long working hours make it difficult for women to return to full-time work after childbirth. Flexible patterns of work may favour women, but they may also be organised to favour employers, keeping workers on call, and unable to reconcile work and family responsibilities. Women have improved their educational resources, and now compete on more equal terms in some occupations. But as jobs feminize their relative pay may decline. And increasing social and economic inequality may be associated with gender, reinforcing gender inequality among low-paid workers. Over time, the gender pay gap for full-time workers has decreased. But the UK has – compared with other EU countries – a very high proportion of women in part-time work, many of whom are deeply disadvantaged, with very low pay and very short hours. Their pay gap has decreased scarcely at all (Grimshaw 2007, Grimshaw and Rubery 2007).

The gender pay gap has been closing over time, with a clear trend established since the 1980s. The ratio of women's pay to men's increased from 66% in 1984 to 73% in 2003. But New Labour's election in 1997 was 'not a catalyst for rapid improvements in women's pay; more damning, women's gains were far more substantial under the Conservatives during the 1987-95 period' (Grimshaw 2007: 135). The latter part of the Labour government has seen improvements again, with an increase to 77% in 2005. The National Minimum Wage has been a key strategy for lifting wages at the bottom, and New Labour's proud boast. But it was set very low and has failed to narrow the gap or lift women's incomes to a living wage. Grimshaw argues that New Labour has failed to examine labour market policies for their part in the gender pay gap (emphasizing instead more individual and cultural factors such as girls' choices in education); it has allowed a two-tier workforce to develop before co-operating with trade unions in its third term to improve the position of low-paid part-time women workers; improving women's pay has conflicted with other policies, especially using a household means-test for tax credit assessments and the privatisation of public services; and governments have been wary of policies against widening wage differentials (Grimshaw 2007: 150).

Women's employment rates are compared with men's in Table 1, and with other European countries, representing those with a long-standing dual earner tradition in the social democracies of Sweden and Denmark and countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Slovenia and Hungary), where women's full-time employment has had strong government support. France, described as a modified male breadwinner system (Lewis 1992) because women could choose between employment and care, is included, as are countries which retain a strong male breadwinner tradition, Ireland and Malta. The percentage of women employed (at a very low threshold of 1-hour per week) is 65.9 in the UK – somewhat above the EU27 average, while the employment gap between men and women is 11.7% and somewhat below the EU27 average. But the UK is more unequal in this respect than the social democracies, with Swedish women's employment rates are only 4% behind men's.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

Women's employment participation was already increasing, with little government support. It has been targeted by New Labour, in a clear ideological shift from the male breadwinner model, whose ideas were entrenched in government policies and assumptions in the post-war period and only a little modified by interim governments. Quality and equality in employment have both been targets, as governments have implemented policies to improve pay through the National Minimum Wage, conditions of part-time workers and a gender equality duty for public sector authorities. But these have not been enough to eliminate gender differences in the quality of jobs or pay, or other rewards from employment, in the context of widening social and economic inequalities.

Gendered care

Childcare as public responsibility – rather than belonging privately to families – was a key change of principle under New Labour. By 2004, Gordon Brown was arguing that 'the early part of the twenty first century should be marked by the introduction of pre-school provision for the under fives and childcare available to all' (Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Comprehensive Spending Review). Commitment to social investment broke a long-established rule, bringing a Manifesto commitment to 'universal' childcare (Labour 2005: 76). Change in the means by which policy goals have been brought about has been incremental but there was a clear change of ideology (Lewis 2007b).

Sure Start brought childcare together with other children's services to disadvantaged areas: these are to be more widely spread in new children's centres. The childcare component of Child Tax Credit, assisting employed parents with formal childcare costs, currently includes employed families earning up to £59,000 per year. Third is public funding for pre-school places for all 3- and 4-year olds.

Are there problems with these strategies? Despite unprecedented commitment from HM Treasury to children and childcare, the system relies on the unreliable: private providers who do not necessarily respond to government incentives, and 17.7 per cent of whom went out of business in the year to 2004 (HM Treasury and DTI 2004: 15). Scandinavian countries offer a more 'universal' model, with government provision, higher spending, well trained staff, and low costs to parents. As in the UK, Scandinavian parents may not always have their expectations met, but there is a more comprehensive framework, with high quality childcare as a social norm and social provision for children after parental leave and before school. This is underpinned by a passion for gender equality as well as for social equality (Ellingsaeter and Leira (eds) 2006). Both these commitments could be said to be more half-hearted under New Labour governments.

[INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE]

Comparison of childcare arrangements is difficult, some countries having strong support for parental leave, while others have nursery provision for 0-3 year-olds; pre-school is key, but may be seen as education rather than childcare. The EU has begun the task of comparing: we can now cautiously assess how comprehensive is the

coverage, how long are the gaps, how good is the quality and how much is government spending (Plantenga & Siegel 2005). Table 2 shows the UK system as very partial, with limited coverage and long gaps between the end of ‘effective leave’ and pre-school admission. For 3-5 year-olds, the UK’s very short part-time hours compare unfavourably with other European countries. Even where pre-school education is part-time elsewhere, opening hours may be longer: for example, Denmark’s pre-school system provides part-time education (3-6 hours per day) but facilities are open from 7am to 5/6 pm for leisure activities. Slovenia, with much lower per capita GDP than the UK, has pre-school opening hours from 6am to 5pm (Plantenga & Siegel 2005). New Labour plans to increase the scope of pre-school places from the current 2.5-hour day to a 3-hour day by 2010, giving a 15-hour week in term-time (with a long-term prospect of a 20-hour week (HM Treasury and DTI 2004). Meanwhile, the 2.5-hour day is too little acknowledged as a source of maternal pressure and gender inequality in the labour market.

There has been real increase in spending and commitment to childcare. There are plans and promises to bring out-of-school childcare places for 3-14 year olds between 8am and 6pm on weekdays (HM Treasury and DTI 2004: 1). But these debates show how far the UK is from a universal system of childcare. Despite unprecedented concern with women’s labour market participation, work-family reconciliation for parents, investment in children through quality services, social inclusion of parents and children, we still have a 2.5 hour day for pre-school children, forcing parents (usually mothers) to patchwork care arrangements if they are to use the time for jobs.

We may also ask how much New Labour policies have enabled parents to care for their own children, and in particular about the gender implications of parental leave policies: do they aim to change the gender relations of care, bringing fathers into care, as employment policies have aimed to bring mothers into employment?

Leave systems have become an important aspect of New Labour’s Work/Family balance agenda (Lewis 2007a). Maternity leave with Statutory Maternity Pay has increased from fourteen weeks to six months. Mothers can take an extra six months’ unpaid leave, which will be paid leave from 2010. The level of maternity pay has nearly doubled, while maternity allowance has improved entitlements to mothers not entitled to the contributory Statutory Maternity Pay. These are important developments supporting mothers’ care for children in the first year of life.

Policies to enable fathers’ involvement in care have come slowly under New Labour, while the support has been modest and encouragement non-existent. Adopting the 1996 European Parental Leave Directive brought fathers’ entitlement to care time (three months but unpaid) after the birth of a child, as well as mothers’. But this minimalist approach (Lewis 2007b), with entitlement to unpaid leave, was followed by further, somewhat reluctant, support to new fatherhood in April 2003, when two weeks paid paternity leave was introduced, paid at the same level as Statutory Maternity Pay (now £108.85 per week). Under the 2006 Work and Families Act, mothers will be able to transfer their right to maternity leave - after the first six months - to fathers, who will then be entitled to take six months’ ‘additional paternity leave’.

While New Labour has developed leave entitlements, to enable reconciliation between work and family for mothers, there are limitations, particularly in comparison with Scandinavian countries, and particularly in relation to fathers. European data, drawing maternity leaves into parental leaves for comparative purposes, and allowing for the level of payment, suggest that ‘effective parental leave’ in the UK is actually rather short (see Table 2). By this measure Sweden has 119 and Hungary 114 weeks of parental leave, while the UK has 25. This measure puts the UK among the lowest group of parental leave providers in Europe. The UK also has one of the longest gaps between the end of effective parental leave and pre-primary School Admission Age, with 131 weeks, compared with 38 weeks in Hungary and 30 in Sweden (Plantenga & Siegel 2005: 10-11) (See Table 2).

Norway has been developing stronger entitlements to paid, non-transferable Daddy leave to encourage fathers’ care. Sweden borrowed this policy in 1995, increasing Norway’s one month to two in 2002. Currently, Iceland has the most developed and effective policy, with a 3 x 3 system: three months for the mother, three for the father, and three for sharing between them. These policies have encouraged a rapid increase in fathers’ taking a share of parental leave, with three-quarters taking their three-month quota. Scandinavian parents are subject to contradictory pressures too, to work long hours, and fathers still take only a small proportion of parental leaves in Nordic countries, (Nyberg 2006, Ellingsaeter and Leira 2006, Lammi-Taskula 2006). However modest in effect, these are important changes, bringing new assumptions about men as fathers, in households as well as among policy-makers.

In the UK, policy ideas and future plans still entrench mothers’ responsibility for care rather than fathers’. Fathers may lag behind mothers in taking responsibility for care, but most fathers see themselves as responsible (Fahey and Spéder 2004), around 80% take some leave (Smeaton 2006, Smeaton and Marsh 2006, Dex and Ward 2007) and – especially in full-time dual earner households - spend time on childcare (O’Brien 2005). In free-market countries fathers may contribute more time to their children, in response to an absence of social support (Smith 2004, Smith and Williams 2007). In all these respects they are ahead of New Labour governments, which have emphasized women’s and men’s responsibility for work rather than men’s responsibility for care.

After ten years, New Labour had established a coherent work/family balance agenda giving employed mothers rights to parental leave during the first year, with support for childcare – including free part-time pre-school places. There were important limitations: services were ‘highly fragmented and unstable’ (Lewis 2007a: 13). Problems of quality, trustworthiness, supply and affordability to parents still encourage discontinuous and part-time employment, especially among less qualified mothers (Hansen 2006). And fathers are nowhere in New Labour’s frame of reference.

Gendered time

Women’s increasing labour market participation has been encouraged and enabled by New Labour: but the male breadwinner model remains entrenched in unequal working lives. If the pay gap for full-time work were closed tomorrow, even – much more

challenging – the pay gap for part-time work, we would not have gender equality, unless we could also bring more equal working time. Gender differences in working time are particularly marked for parents, with fathers likely to work long hours, while mothers are likely to work short part-time ones. Working time preferences, on the other hand, are for more equal working time between men and women (Fagan 2003).

Flexible working has been a key element of New Labour Work/Life Balance policies. These began in 2003 with rights to request flexible working for parents of children under school-age (under 18 where children are disabled) and were extended to carers of adults under the 2006 Work and Families legislation, with further extension to parents of older children currently promised. Policies have been developed cautiously, seeking agreement with business, persuading employers and employers' organizations that flexible working could be developed in their interests as well as parents' interests. Policies have aimed at gender-neutrality rather than gender equality. As it is mothers more than fathers who currently make their lives flexible to meet children's needs, more women than men have requested flexible working, and most requests have been accepted. These rights have been used by around a quarter of parents with young children, and have been accepted by business organizations and by parents as enabling employment and reconciliation of work and families. The notion that employees have family responsibilities which employers should acknowledge has contributed to changing employment culture: mothers – and to a smaller extent fathers - have benefited from increasing rights and changing expectations (Lewis and Cambell 2007a).

But regulating working time is another matter: there is no suggestion here of changing working culture, a move towards more rights, more family-friendly hours, or of gender equality as an ambition. New Labour has developed its time policies within a framework of individual choice. It has argued for freedom for companies and for employees, to choose working hours. This model of individual choice ignores the joint responsibilities and decision-making of parents: where parents have dependent children, fathers' choices impact on mothers' choices. Long working hours also prevent mothers from taking on more responsible jobs (Fox, Pascall & Warren 2006). New Labour inherited – and retains – an opt-out from the European Union's Working Time Directive, giving individuals the right to opt out of the 48-hour week: the UK is the only member state not enforcing the Working Time Directive. The number of people working more than 48 hours has been increasing (Coates and Oettinger 2007: 127).

What routes are there to more equal working time? Three routes in other European countries could be characterized as Sweden making women's working lives as far as possible like men's, the Netherlands making men's working lives more like women's, while France offers a mid-point between men's lives and women's. The Swedish route has been to support full-time employment – or nearly full-time employment - for women and men within a dual earner model, through high public spending on childcare and parental leaves. The Netherlands has pursued a part-time route: the 'Polder model' developed to share employment through encouraging part-time work, while the social ideal of the 'Combination Scenario' aims to allow men and women equally to combine paid and unpaid work, which should be equally shared and equally valued (Plantenga 2002: 53-4). Finally France has legislated for a maximum 35-hour week for everyone. As in the Netherlands, this started as a policy to share employment, at a time of high

unemployment, but more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work in families was also an objective (Fagnani & Letablier 2006).

Comparative data in Table 3 show that across the EU around one third of women's employment is part-time, which is nearly five times the rate for men. UK women's rate of 42% is well above the European average, but UK women are also disadvantaged by the extent to which they work short part-time hours for low pay. Part-time work is not a feature in Central and Eastern Europe, with only 5.8% of women in Hungary employed this way. The Netherlands, where part-time work has been encouraged, has 75.1% of women employed part-time and 22.6% of men. The table also shows full-time male working hours in the UK at 44 per week, three hours above the EU average, and four hours above women's full-time hours. But UK men and women are also likely to work very long hours, with 18% above 48 hours (Eurostat 2007). These comparisons show the UK retaining gender inequality in working time, leading to unequal earnings and unequal pensions.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

New Labour has made both ideological and practical changes in relations between work and family, through employment and Work/Family Balance policies, which have enabled women's increasing labour market participation and attachment. It has recognized changing families as bringing a need to combine motherhood and employment, among lone parents and among couples. Parental rights to ask for flexible working time have been used, and are clearly of use to mothers of young children, and some fathers of young children. These policies have had employment rather than gender equality at their heart: they pose some risks of entrenching the different working lives of men and women. Meanwhile they have ignored key gender differences in working time. Gender equality in access to security and earnings depends on more equal working time. While the gender pay gap for full-timers has reduced, gender inequality in working time – including career breaks and part-time work – has become a more serious factor in women's ability to support themselves. It has also become a more serious difference between women who can afford to pay for care they can trust, and those who cannot. But gender equality has not been the guiding commitment in these work-life balance policies. Reducing the working week would mainly limit men's working hours – but would enable mothers to sustain more continuous working lives. While embracing flexibility, New Labour has rejected regulation to limit the working week.

Gendered income

At the heart of the Beveridge system were assumptions that men would earn enough through paid employment to support families, and women would be dependent on men's earnings and pension contributions. Insecurities in families have increased. Women have increasingly figured as employees and contributors to social security. But the system devised in the 1940s was based upon men's working lives. Women have joined the labour market, but women's working lives have been characterized by discontinuity, part-time employment and low pay. Women's lack of independent pensions has emerged in

debates leading to the Pensions Act in 2007 as a continuing problem of the Beveridge framework. Until 1997, lone mothers fell outside the male breadwinner assumptions, and were particularly likely to be on means-tested benefits. So tax credits for lone parents, including childcare tax credits, on a basis that assumes and allows part-time work combined with care, represent a radical transformation of the male breadwinner model.

There are plenty of reasons for pensions to be on the social policy agenda: the ageing population, inadequate savings, whether through personal pensions (dating from the Thatcher years), company pensions, or state pensions. While the question of how to produce enough savings to keep pensioners out of poverty is on the agenda, the gender dimensions have been too little debated (Bellamy and Rake 2005). National Insurance pensions, occupational pensions, personal pensions or savings: everywhere men's contributions earn more entitlements than women's. As cohabiting partners and wives, women may be included in any of these arrangements, and the allocation of pension rights on divorce is now more likely to acknowledge unpaid work in women's contribution to marriage. But gender differences in working lives bring gender differences in entitlements to pensions, putting women at greater risk of poverty.

The core National Insurance pension entitlement in the UK is the Basic State Pension. But whereas nearly all men retire with the full state pension in their own right, a minority of women do so. Older women may have taken the Married Woman's Option to opt out of National Insurance, because they would be covered through their husbands, as indeed, some are: a wife may receive a pension at a percentage of her husband's rate and be entitled to inherit his pension rights. Others may lack entitlement because of low pay, below the lower earnings limit for contributions, and/or because care responsibilities have limited their labour market attachment and reduced entitlements. For all these reasons the full Basic State Pension was received by only 23% of women reaching 60 in September 2004, while on average those reaching 60 in 2005/6 have 70% of a full Basic Pension (DWP 2005: 73). The DWP argues that the figures are changing rapidly because of women's increasing labour market participation, and the effects of Home Responsibilities Protection, introduced in 1978 to protect the Basic Pension rights of those caring for a child under 17 by reducing the number of years needed to qualify. The DWP has defended the contributory system, on the grounds that women in their early forties or younger are accruing pension rights equivalent to men and by 2025 over 80% of women reaching pension age will be entitled to a full basic state pension (DWP 2005: 66-82). But this solution will not meet the needs of those retiring before 2025. There are problems at the heart of the National Insurance Scheme, designed in the post-war era around men's working lives and secure families. Most women's working lives have been interrupted and low paid. Falling marriage rates and higher divorce rates, with now half of all marriages ending in divorce, mean that the Beveridgean model, which built women's dependency on men into the welfare state, is not a secure framework for women's pensions. The 2007 Pensions Act does bring better recognition for those whose working lives are interrupted by care, with qualifying years for the basic pension reduced to thirty, and a new system of credits in the National Insurance System. A universal citizens' pension would be a more radical solution to a system too much designed around men's

lives: the cutting and pasting of the insurance system so far leaves 77% of women reaching 60 unable to claim a full Basic State Pension.

New Labour's response to pensioner poverty is to means test, to focus pension guarantees on the poorest pensioners. There is now a Pension Credit, paying around £40 per week to around 3.2 million households, with an income guarantee, currently £109 per week. In many ways this benefits women, whose life expectancy is greater than men's and who have a high risk of poverty in old age: they have been two-thirds of the recipients of Minimum Income Guarantees. But the Department for Work and Pensions estimates that between 22 per cent and 36 per cent of entitled pensioners do not claim.

If the means test – a classic liberal welfare state response to poverty – is the current solution for pensions, so has New Labour brought tax credits as a core strategy for encouraging work and reducing poverty. It has been extended since April 2003, with Child Tax Credits paid to 90% of families, and Working Tax Credits, aimed at rather fewer. The new system splits the payment between carer and worker: now Child Tax Credit is paid to the main carer and addresses child poverty, while Working Tax Credit offers the incentive to work (Bennett 2005). The Child Tax Credits are now a major part of the government's anti-poverty strategy, and 'the biggest ever state boost to mothers' incomes' (Toynbee and Walker 2005: 71). The universal system of child benefit, paid on behalf of all children, remains. Hilary Land comments that we now have the closest thing to the Inland Revenue's claim 'single seamless system' of support for families with children that Britain has ever experienced (Land 2004: 4).

There remain serious problems in accessing childcare. But for lone mothers, Working Tax Credit, incorporating an element for childcare, and Child Tax Credit, which they receive whether employed or not, bring real choice about balancing work and care: they can receive support if they work 16 hours, or more support if they work 30. This allows a shorter working week to be supplemented through tax credits, and may enable lone parents, who are mostly mothers, to lift themselves and their children out of poverty, and keep a foot in the labour market, while keeping time for care.

For mothers with partners, the Tax Credit system has more mixed implications. The Child Tax Credit brings material support for children and childcare. But there are concerns about joint taxation, with the Tax Credit system built on household means tests. Mothers will face high rates of marginal taxation/tax credit loss, bringing disincentives to employment (Bennett 2005). Mothers in couples are also more likely to pay childcare costs; 80% of costs is the maximum proportion covered by credits. It is also targeted on smaller families, making childcare costs a significant barrier to work for mothers in larger families (Land 2004).

The Beveridge system was designed in the post-war era around gender difference, with women expected to achieve social security through their husbands' employment. As families have destabilized, and women have joined the labour market, governments have changed the rules, to account – in some measure – for women's need for social security as individuals and as parents, with or without men. But the male model of working life

still lurks beneath the surface: because of low pay, part-time employment and broken working lives, only a quarter of women reaching pension age now are entitled to a full basic state pension. This figure will not reach 80% until 2025, leaving many older women in poverty for the foreseeable future. New Labour has changed the rules in another key way, introducing means-tested tax credits as a solution to poverty for children, for workers, for childcare and for pensioners. This brings welcome resources to households with low incomes, many headed by women, but dependence on means tests brings well established problems of penalties for work and limited take-up. New Labour assumes that women can now earn their own security as individuals – rejecting assumptions of male breadwinners – but unequal working lives put women at greater risk of poverty.

Gendered power

Gender systems are also systems of power: welfare states affect gender relations, women's autonomy as individuals, their ability to support themselves and their place in public politics. Equality legislation has brought women important rights, but inequalities in paid work, care, income and time bring unequal voice in households, civil society, local politics, state and European governments. In households the continuing gender division of labour suggests that women's voice is weaker, and their lower incomes may give them less say in major decisions than men (Sung and Bennett 2007). How far has New Labour come in engendering politics, to include the representation of women, to make gender equality issues salient in government, and to enable gender equality in households.

Women's representation increased dramatically upon the election of New Labour in 1997. Feminist action within the party ensured debates about representative politics, and brought all-women shortlists. Through these Labour brought its representation of women on shortlists and elected MPs to 24% in 1997 (Annesley & Gains 2007). A Women's Minister led responsibility for representing women's interests in government and cabinet, and through a dedicated Women's Unit (now part of the Government Equalities Office) and continued support for the Equal Opportunities Commission (now part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission). Policy coalitions, including organizations such as the Women's Budget Group, have put feminist concerns on the agenda at the core of government. Devolution brought a new Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, whose constitution reflected feminist influences, and enabled selection and electoral systems to be used to foster women's representation. Gender equality in representation has been reached in the Welsh Assembly, which is now a world leader in this respect. At the level of government in Westminster, women have been represented as Ministers, at around 30%, but not so well in core positions (Durose & Gains 2007). These amount to considerable changes in the representation of women and the likelihood of gender equality being taken into account in New Labour government.

Internationally, women's low level of political representation is being targeted by quotas (Dahlerup 2006). Accumulated evidence points to discriminatory processes as the key to women's continued under-representation, rather than women's choices or poorer qualification for election (Phillips 1991). Therefore, solutions may be found through changing political processes. Proponents of the parity principle argue representation is

not democratic unless both men and women are equally represented. Proposals for gender quotas come in many forms, and are designed to ensure a minimum proportion of women are elected, or to give parity between men and women. A ‘parity law’ has been used in France to regulate the proportion of women candidates in local regional and European elections, though not in national parliamentary ones: it increased women’s representation from 22 per cent to 47.5 per cent in the cities in March 2001 (Squires and Wickham-Jones 2001).

Nordic countries are used to being at the top of gender leagues. The long, unbroken women’s movement has worked to increase acceptability of stronger women’s participation and the unacceptability of men’s over-representation. Women’s stronger position in employment, proportional representation, social democratic party dominance and party quotas – though not compulsory legal quotas - have increased women’s representation in parliament. This has been gradual process built on consensual politics over decades. Sweden is still at the top of European countries, with 45% of women parliamentarians. But Nordic feminists are now surprised to find their position at the top of the international league taken by Rwanda, bringing debates in Scandinavia about whether the consensual process has been too gradual (Dahlerup 2006). New parliaments in Scotland and Wales have also offered opportunities to build systems in which women can win seats in Europe too (albeit at a devolved rather than UK level) and have reached 50% in Wales, as we have seen. Quotas are rapidly growing as a means to avoid a hundred-year wait for women to be fully represented, though they face barriers in some developed democracies, particularly those without proportional representation, with entrenched male MPs and party selection processes, and where the dominant ideology is based on liberal ideals emphasizing equal opportunity rather than equality of result.

[INSERT TABLE 4 AROUND HERE]

Table 4 compares women’s position in government, politics and civil service with other selected countries. The UK is around the EU average, and well below Sweden, which has 40% women or more in each category here. The UK political system has been highly resistant to the representation of women, and to the inclusion of a gender equality politics. Women have acted through the labour party, which had been dominated by class inequality rather than gender inequality. They have made important gains in representing women and women’s interests at all levels, from local government through central state institutions, civil society organisations, European and national parliaments to the core institutions of the central state – especially the Treasury – where key decisions are more likely to be made. There has been a serious transformation of the business of government, but not serious enough, while women have to be content with around 30% of ministerial positions and 20% of MPs, and while agendas contradicting gender equality – such as the spread of free markets in public services – have been flourishing (Rummery et al 2007).

Conclusion

This chapter has asked how far New Labour has shifted from the male breadwinner model of gender inequality? What have been the limits, and what might be priorities for a more radical assault on inequalities in work, care, income, time and power? Change

there has been, in assumptions about mothers' place in the labour market, and the need for social support for work-family reconciliation. Policy for mothers' employment – including childcare - has been a key government priority. But policies for gender equality in care, time, income and power have been more muted. Neo-liberal ideology has also reduced the impact of gender equality policies. Continuing social inequalities affect the degree to which women have access to quality jobs, childcare, control over time and security.

Social democratic regimes with high social spending are clearly the most successful for gender equality (Lewis 1992). Where care work is supported by social spending, women are more likely to have full-time continuous employment, and be able to reconcile work with family responsibilities. Can governments afford gender equality if it means social spending? Academic social policy has for some time debated different welfare regimes and argued the superiority of the social democratic model: 'Far from being "horses for courses"', the social democratic welfare regime turns out to be the best choice' whatever the goal (Goodin et al 1999: 260). Measuring child well-being in rich countries, on a wide range of measures, Unicef (2007) shows the UK leaving more children in poverty than all the other countries covered, while Scandinavian countries are the highest achievers. An account of economic indicators concludes that: 'the best performing industrial economies at the beginning of the 21st century are those that have least in common with the neo-liberal model': the Scandinavian social democracies in particular (Panić 2007). Perhaps our government cannot afford not to adopt a more social democratic stance and the gender equality that goes with it?

A universal citizenship model, in which both men and women have obligations to care and rights to support as carers, would increase gender equality and bring social and economic benefits to children and adults. Social support for childcare is a pre-requisite: especially a more comprehensive provision for pre-school children, beyond the 2 ½ hour day. Policies towards involving men in care are needed: innovative parental leave policies (mainly Scandinavian) are about changing gender relations at home. Policies towards more equal time are necessary if women are to earn enough to ensure their own security. Women cannot be expected to keep themselves out of poverty in old age if they have unequal working lives. A universal citizenship model might go further than Scandinavian countries in enabling men's lives to be more like women's. We need policies around employment, but a wider agenda, and a more social democratic model, would shift us from the male breadwinner model in practice as well as in ideology.

Tables

Table 1: Female and male employment rates, as percentage of women and men aged 15 to 64, and difference between male and female, 2005¹

	Employment rate: female	Employment rate: male	Employment rate Male – female
Sweden	70.4	74.4	4.0
Denmark	71.9	79.8	7.9
Slovenia	61.3	70.4	9.1
Hungary	51.0	63.1	12.1
France	57.6	68.8	11.2
UK	65.9	77.6	11.7
Ireland	58.3	76.9	18.6
Malta	33.7	73.8	40.1
EU 27	56.0	70.8	14.8

Source: Eurostat structural indicators Europa NewCronos website 2006 and author's calculations

¹ The employment rates are calculated by dividing the number of women aged 15 to 64 in employment by the total female population of the same age group. The indicator is based on the EU Labour Force Survey. The survey covers the entire population living in private households and excludes those in collective households such as boarding houses, halls of residence and hospitals. Employed population consists of those persons who during the reference week did any work for pay or profit for at least one hour, or were not working but had jobs from which they were temporarily absent.

Table 2: Effective parental leave, paternity leave, childcare and pre-school coverage

	Effective parental leave ¹	Paternity + parental leave reserved for fathers	Gap bet end of effective leave and pre-school admission	Estimated coverage (0-3 years) (not harmonized) ²	Estimated coverage (3 – compulsory school age) (not harmonized)	Minimum qualification for pre-school teacher
Sweden	119 weeks	2 weeks paid paternity + 2 months parental	30 weeks	63%	82%	University education
Denmark	36 weeks	14 days paid paternity + 2 months parental	118 weeks	68%	98%	3.5 years of higher vocational training
Hungary	114 weeks	5 days	38 weeks	6%	86%	Title of professional educator
France	48 weeks	2 weeks paid	42 weeks	31%	100%	
Ireland	11 weeks		105 weeks	41%	17%	3 years post-18 degree course
UK	25 weeks	2 weeks paid	131 weeks	10%	30%	Half of the staff to be appropriately qualified

Sources:

Plantenga & Siegel 2005 (drawing on Eurostat and national sources)

ILO Examples of leave provisions for fathers (Conditions of Work and Employment Programme website)

¹ The length is weighted to reflect the level of payment

²Non-harmonised data are used because they include the UK. When harmonized to take account of availability of leave, Sweden's coverage is 100% for 0-3 year-olds and 90% for 3- compulsory school age: Swedish parents take around 14 months paid leave on average.

Table 3: Part-time work and full-time hours, 2005

	Part-time rate: female	Part-time rate: male	Part-time rate female: male	Working hours: full- time male	Working hours: full-time female
Sweden	39.6	11.5	3.4: 1	40	40
Denmark	33.0	12.7	2.1: 1	40	38
Slovenia	11.1	7.2	1.5: 1	42	41
Hungary	5.8	2.7	2.1: 1	41	40
Netherlands	75.1	22.6	3.3: 1	39	38
France	30.7	5.7	5.4: 1	40	38
UK	42.7	10.4	4.1: 1	44	40
Malta	21.1	4.5	4.7: 1	42	39
EU 25	32.4	7.4	4.4: 1	41	39

Source: European Commission/Eurostat 2007 *Living conditions in Europe* (Table 3.2: 46, Table 3.4: 50)) and author's calculations.

Table 4: Women in decision-making

	Percentage of women Senior Ministers in national government	Percentage of women members of single/lower house Parliaments	Percentage of women among highest ranking civil servants	Percentage of women among second highest ranking civil servants
Sweden	50	48	36	39
Slovenia	6	13	24	47
Hungary	14	10	11	19
France	13	13	21	32
UK	30	20	25	20
Ireland	21	12	13	10
Malta	15	9		
Average EU 25	24	23		

Source: European Commission Database on Women and Men in Decision-making 2006

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