

How does the conditionality in Universal Credit affect women?

OVERVIEW

- The introduction of Universal Credit entails a significant expansion of welfare conditionality.
- Numerically, women are disproportionately affected by the new conditionality regime for lead carers of children within Universal Credit.
- Lead carers are subject to different levels of work-related requirements depending on the age of the youngest child and face sanctions for non-compliance.
- To investigate the impacts of the new conditionality regime, mothers subject to the conditionality within Universal Credit were interviewed.
- The findings demonstrate that the conditionality within Universal Credit devalues unpaid care, yet is largely ineffective in improving sustained moves into adequately paid work.
- The conditionality also constrains mothers' agency regarding engagement in paid work and unpaid care.
- More broadly, the conditionality constitutes a significant shift in the UK's social security system, which exacerbates women's marginalised position in the current citizenship framework.
- Changes to the Universal Credit conditionality regime are needed to increase the recognition of mothers' caring responsibilities, promote mothers' position in the paid labour market and reduce the limits placed on their agency.
- Ultimately, this book calls for social security benefits to be designed and delivered in ways that enhance women's citizenship status.

CONTEXT

This research is particularly relevant at the current time given that the UK government has recently further expanded welfare conditionality with the aim of increasing moves into paid work. This book demonstrates that welfare conditionality is particularly problematic for women as it can exacerbate their weaker labour market position, devalue unpaid care and limit their agency.

The book offers practical alternatives for improving women's position in the paid labour market as well as providing recommendations for promoting the value of unpaid care and increasing their agency, so that the UK social security system is more inclusive of them.






Welfare That Works for Women? Mothers' Experiences of the Conditionality within Universal Credit by Kate Andersen is published by Policy Press, January 2023

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FINDINGS

- Within Universal Credit policy and practice there is an almost exclusive emphasis on paid work and a failure to recognise and take into account mothers' caring responsibilities.
- Mandatory expectations of work-related requirements and paid work hinder mothers' ability to deliver unpaid care by limiting time to undertake unpaid care and increasing tensions in interactions with children.
- There are considerable challenges in taking children to appointments at the JobCentre Plus.
- The Universal Credit conditionality regime is largely ineffective in helping mothers enter secure, sustainable, adequately paid jobs and progress in paid work.
- Key contributing factors in the lack of sustained moves into secure, adequately paid work and the absence of increases in earnings were the severe difficulties in accessing the formal childcare provision within Universal Credit and the scarcity of substantive employment-related support provided by work coaches and the JobCentre Plus.
- The 'work-first' approach inherent within the Universal Credit conditionality regime furthers women's disadvantaged labour market position.
- Mothers experience a considerable amount of compulsion within the Universal Credit conditionality regime.
- The compulsion was particularly evident in the lack of negotiation when the Claimant Commitment was formed and the mandatory requirement to undertake paid work or increase earnings backed by sanctions.
- The conditionality within Universal Credit limits women's ability to exercise agency in regard to engagement in work-related requirements, unpaid care and paid work.
- Ultimately, rather than help create a citizenship framework that is more inclusive of women, the conditionality furthers an androcentric concept of citizenship and thereby exacerbates women's disadvantaged citizenship status.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- Concerning the Universal Credit conditionality regime specifically, detailed conversations between claimants and work coaches are needed so that Claimant Commitments can be tailored to personal circumstances.
- The standard number of expected hours of paid work and job search should be lowered.
- Claimant Commitments should be mutually agreed rather than imposed.
- Specialist advisors are needed who have an understanding of caring responsibilities and the challenges lead carers face in obtaining paid work.
- More substantial, tailored employment-related support is needed.
- The requirement for parents to make upfront payments for childcare costs needs to be removed.
- Subjecting mothers to conditionality needs to be reconsidered given its negative impacts and the limited evidence of its effectiveness.
- More broadly, citizenship needs to be redefined so that unpaid care is viewed as a valid citizenship contribution.
- For unpaid care to be valued, policies are needed that provide time to care and financial resources.
- Gender inequalities in the paid labour market and women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care need to be addressed through implementing policies that contribute towards combatting gendered horizontal and vertical occupational segregation and the gender pay gap, redistributing responsibility for unpaid care from women to men and the state, and prioritising the reconciliation of unpaid care and paid work for both men and women.
- Women's agency needs to be enlarged by implementing policies that enable women to make genuine choices regarding unpaid care and paid work.
- Policy needs to be supportive rather than prescriptive, which is particularly important given the diversity of families.