

Back to work policies need gender awareness

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UK programmes designed to help the unemployed get back to work and support young parents are losing impact because they are not designed with the participants' gender in mind. Men as well as women can lose out as a result of 'gender blind' policies. This finding, based on two case studies in the North East of England, appears in *Critical Social Policy* this week, published by SAGE.

The paper, 'Striking out': Shifting labour markets, welfare to work policy and the renegotiation of [gender](#) performances, details stay-at-home dads gaining skills and negotiating gender constructs to find work in the childcare sector, only to find their communities reluctant to offer childcare work to men. Meanwhile, teenage dads are under-supported both in their new role as parents and in their position of responsibility as wage earners.

Since 1997, the English government has been committed to the inter-related policy aims of reducing health inequalities and tackling social exclusion. According to the paper's authors, Katherine Smith from the University of Bath and Clare Bambra and Kerry Joyce from the University of Durham, initiatives have largely been focused on the supply side (aimed at potential employees), and have been 'gender blind'. The underlying assumption is that unemployed men and women can get back to work when they receive the right combination of training and support.

The authors used data from qualitative case studies of two interventions in the North-East of England. One study offered unemployed parents

childcare training, and the other provided vocational and advisory support to young parents.

The first case study investigates a 'gender blind' intervention aiming to get the unemployed back to work, which encouraged unemployed fathers to carry out childcare training to pursuing careers in childcare. The policy behind the intervention did not intend to challenge traditional gender roles. The participants found positive ways to deal with gender identities, so that they were able to envisage themselves gaining work in childcare. Unfortunately the intervention did not support the men in this, or in dealing with negative community attitudes to men working in childcare. The study highlights the oversight that in this labour market, working age men would be a target group for the intervention, yet the jobs available were in a sector dominated by women.

Teenage mothers often hit the headlines, but surprisingly little is known about their babies' fathers. Despite the common stereotype of an invisible or absent teen father, recent research suggests that large numbers of teenage fathers do play a positive role in their children's well being.

The second intervention provided vocational and advisory support to young parents. Legislation's main focus has been on facilitating women's dual roles as both mothers and employees, despite recent policy moves to acknowledge the importance of fathers' involvement in re-conceptualising relations between parents and children.

The short-sightedness of 'gender blind' policies has been noted before, but the authors point out that a common assumption is that gender blind means 'male-centred'. The findings from the second case study suggest that interventions aiming to support young parents should consider the benefits of targeted support for young fathers in addition to that offered to young mothers. The first highlights the ineffectiveness of training the

unemployed using a gender blind approach, such that their new skills may not be utilised.

"It is important not to assume that policy biases which favour some men in some situations will necessarily favour all men in all situations," the authors argue. Not only should policies take socially excluded men into greater consideration, but policymakers also need to "consciously and consistently reflect on the potential impact of all social policies on gender relations."

Although this may benefit more women than men, men cannot be ignored - not only because tackling inequality in gender needs their participation, but also because men's lives are often closely intertwined with those of their families.

The UK's Labour government is aware of the importance of gender to employment and social policy. A publication by the [Social Exclusion Unit](#) (1999) directly suggest that policy responses to some social problems need to be more sensitive to gender issues and the recent Equality Bill (2008) demonstrates a continuing awareness of the need for gender parity. This paper and other recent research suggest that this remains at best aspirational. Gender must be re-introduced and re-emphasised in social policy debate, and policies should be audited for their impact on gender.

More information: 'Striking out': Shifting labour markets, welfare to work policy and the renegotiation of gender performances by Katherine E. Smith, University of Bath; Clare Bambra and Kerry Joyce, University of Durham, is published in the February issue of *Critical Social Policy*, published by SAGE. [DOI:10.1177/0261018309350809](https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018309350809)

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