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# **Work, welfare and gender inequalities: An analysis of activation strategies for partnered women in the UK, Australia and Denmark**

## **Abstract**

In industrialized countries women have increasingly become a target group for active labour market policies, or 'activation'. However, to date, the burgeoning literature on activation has tended to overlook its link with the highly gendered nature of welfare. This article presents the first comparative analysis of activation approaches for partnered women in the UK, Australia and Denmark. Three core arguments are put forward that emphasise how the *ideas* (causal claims, beliefs and assumptions) articulated by key policy actors were crucial to both the construction and delivery of activation policies. Firstly, women's differentiated access to benefits directly conflicted with the focus on the individual within activation policies. Secondly, activation was premised upon paid labour, embodying ideational assumptions about the meaning of (paid) work, in turn devaluing caring labour. Thirdly, the 'problematization' of women outside the labour market resulted in their gendered 'processing' through the social security and activation systems.

## **Keywords**

activation, couples, gender inequality, ideas, partnered women, recalibration

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## **Introduction**

One of the key features of welfare reform in industrialised countries since the 1990s has been the development of active labour market policies. Such policies involve the imposition of compulsory programmes and mandatory requirements for benefit recipients which enforce work and residualize welfare (Peck, 2001: 10). This orientation towards tougher conditionality for benefits – often termed 'workfare' – has been integrally connected to, and has driven a more neo-liberal and market-orientated social welfare policy (Peck, 2001). Consequently, more groups outside the labour market have been identified and channeled into activation programmes and women have become a key focus: initially lone parents, and subsequently the female partners/spouses of unemployed men.

This article draws on the first comparative study to focus upon the UK, Australia and Denmark as countries that have developed activation programmes for jobless married or partnered women. Comparing three different welfare models was a vehicle for developing a substantive theoretical and empirical analysis of the variegated gendering of activation across countries. The UK and Australia have been characterised as 'liberal' or 'residual' social welfare models in which the state provides a safety net when the

market and the family fail (Esping Andersen, 1990). By contrast, the Danish welfare state has been viewed as representative of a social democratic, universalist welfare state. In terms of activation strategies Australia and the UK have both deployed a 'targeted' approach to categories of benefit recipients, including partnered women. Denmark's strategy has been more 'encompassing' involving 'activation' of all who receive unemployment-related benefits, but specific groups have also been targeted.

The article presents an empirical study of the *ideas* (Béland, 2009) underpinning activation policies for partnered women, using the analytical framework of 'welfare recalibration' (Ferrera and Hemerijck, 2003). The article puts forward three key arguments regarding the gendered implications of such ideas. Firstly, the conceptualisation of partnered women as 'dependents' resulted in their differentiated access to benefits, which directly conflicted with the focus on the individual within activation. Secondly, activation was premised upon paid labour, embodying ideational assumptions about the meaning of (paid) work, in the process devaluing caring labour. Thirdly, activation policies were underpinned by powerful ideas which 'problematized' women outside the labour market in particular ways, leading to the gendered 'processing' of women through the social security and activation systems.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section introduces the analytical framework for the study: 'welfare recalibration' (Ferrera and Hemerijck, 2003), followed by a discussion of the methods employed in the research. The findings section is structured according to the four sub-dimensions of recalibration (functional, distributive, normative and politico-institutional). The concluding section considers the implications of the findings for both theory and future research.

### **'Welfare recalibration' as a metaphor for policy change**

Many comparative studies (Lødemel and Trickey, 2001, Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl, 2008) have focused on the perceived effectiveness of activation in reducing unemployment or 'inactivity' but have overlooked the gendered dimension of such policies. Peck's (2001) influential critique of workfare crucially omitted the political-cultural character of the gendered ideas which underpin it (Clarke, 2004: 46). The gender dimension has also been largely absent from the literature on welfare state change, although it is central to the recasting of the work/welfare model (Lewis, 2002: 339) through activation. Activation programmes have recalibrated citizenship by valorising only 'economic' participation through labour market inclusion. This has been premised on the idea of an individualised 'adult worker model' (Lewis, 2001), or a 'universal breadwinner model' which aim to achieve gender equity by making both men and women breadwinners (Fraser, 1989). These are aspirational models which have not reflected the complexity of social reality (Lewis, 2001). Embodying ideas about gender 'sameness', they have assumed that all women are capable of paid work, unencumbered by caring responsibilities and ignored the gendered division of paid and unpaid labour (Lewis, 2007). Such ideas are key to understanding why policies change. Ideas are causal beliefs, guides for action "which afford power to actors, and when...embedded in institutions...institutionalize, even legitimize, power differentials"

(Béland and Cox, 2011: 9). Activation is a product of governance structures, institutional settings and 'hegemonic regulatory assumptions' (Serrano Pascual, 2007) - the latter have received little attention in comparative activation studies, although they are crucial in framing policy design and in justifying policy decisions (p.278).

A key conceptual and theoretical challenge for comparative welfare and activation research is to develop a framework that captures the way gender as a social relation is shaped by the ideas which underpin the complex dynamics of welfare restructuring and policy change. 'Welfare recalibration' (Ferrera and Hemerijck, 2003) is grounded in the historical institutionalist view of these processes, focusing on the path-dependent *institutional* reconfiguration which frames policy choices (p.89). Derived from Pierson's (2001) three worlds of welfare state reform, it considers policy change as incremental or gradual (see Streeck and Thelen, 2005) through four interdependent sub-dimensions: functional, distributive, normative and politico-institutional. The value of the recalibration concept lies in its potential to go beyond often simplistic debates around national or policy-specific convergence/divergence. The framework provides a useful schema for analyzing and deconstructing the variegated, unstable and ambiguous nature of policy change.

Functional recalibration describes the broader 're-balancing' of social welfare (Ferrera and Hemerijck, 2003: 90) in response to new social needs produced by structural changes in the family and labour market (Rubery, 2011). This includes the shift from passive social protection to activation, the opening up of employment opportunities for women and the corresponding increase in demand for childcare. These recalibrations reflect the drive to increase women's employability across welfare states (Ferrera and Hemerijck, 2003: 90).

Distributive recalibration relates to differentiation amongst social groups in accessing both social welfare and employment. Orloff (1993) argues that men make claims based on entitlement as 'worker-citizens', while women make claims both as workers and as members of families. For Sainsbury (1996) the essential variation between welfare states lies in the bases of eligibility and entitlement for social security. Marital status is important, as is the extent to which women are recognized as workers, and/or as providers of care for children or adults. Women have gradually become more visible within social security systems through the 'principle of care' (Sainsbury, 1996) for children and, to a lesser extent, of adults. In activation there has been a clear movement towards 'individualizing' the social problem of unemployment and targeting interventions towards individuals (Borghi and van Berkel, 2007: 246).

Normative recalibration concerns the values, norms, ideas and discourses underpinning policies and informs the policy developments evidenced in the other dimensions. Ideas are key to the politicised policy process and can be mobilized as part of a broader political ideology. In essence ideas are central to the construction of policy 'problems', to the cultural and discursive frames which actors use to challenge or justify existing policy arrangements and to the presentation and selection of policy alternatives (Béland, 2009). Social problems and needs are not based on rational 'problem

definition', but on 'problem representation' (Bacchi, 1999: 199); policy proposals are socially constructed, conveying a diagnosis of the problem to be addressed. When constructing policies, policymakers assign (either explicitly or implicitly) prescribed roles to women as wives/partners, mothers, carers, dependents, or workers. Such ideas reflect or reinforce societal expectations concerning women's labour market participation. As a result, women's poverty may be framed as a problem of 'economic inactivity', rather than a result of inadequate income support, of low-paid work, a lack of suitable jobs, or of their unequal responsibility for unpaid care.

Politico-institutional recalibration refers to the institutions, levels and actors involved in the governance of policies. As recipients of activation, women are situated within institutional and social processes which are gendered (Daly, 2011: 7). These social processes encompass institutions of the welfare state, such as 'one stop shops' (Jobcentres) and 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980). Through the increasing privatisation of employment services non-state delivery agents have been contracted to deliver employment services. Such recalibrations open people up to governmental (as well as corporate) power and to new subjective orientations of work and welfare (Newman 2007: 366).

To summarise, the approach taken in this research was to develop critical insights into the ideas which inform the activation strategies for partnered women in three countries. Recalibration as a heuristic device permits analysis of these ideas as reflections of policy change at the broader institutional level. Ideas can become powerful 'cognitive locks' (Béland, 2009) for policy actors, becoming hegemonic and acting as a brake on alternative ways of framing policies. These perspectives were the focus of the study and the next section considers the methods used.

## **Methods**

The aim of the research was to analyze the framing of the activation policies for partnered women in the three countries through the perspectives of actors involved in the policy process. The research involved national-level case studies comprising qualitative, documentary analysis and elite interviews in the UK, Australia and Denmark. The choice of countries is based on examples of different configurations of welfare and activation. Barbier's (2001) binary of activation regimes characterises Britain as liberal and Denmark as universalistic but there is 'hybridisation' (Hemerijck, 2006) between regime types. The policy trajectories of Australia and the UK as liberal welfare states have often been assumed to converge, sometimes overplaying the similarities and ignoring the distinctiveness of the respective models. Although Denmark is characteristically social democratic, it also exhibits liberal facets, such as a flexible labour market (Borchost, 2002: 270). Through this three-country comparison the research aimed to present a more nuanced insight into differentiated neo-liberal strategies for moving women in to work.

The research questions that the study set out to answer were:

1. What is the overarching context for the activation strategies for partnered women in the UK, Australia and Denmark (*functional recalibration*)?
2. How do the ideas underpinning social security and activation result in differentiated policies for partnered women as a social group (*distributive recalibration*)?
3. How is the policy 'problem' of partnered women outside the labour market framed in each of the countries (*normative recalibration*)?
4. How do ideas shape the delivery of activation for partnered women and how far do they result in gendered outcomes (*politico-institutional recalibration*)?

Interviewing elites is valuable in providing access to data about policy decisions which is not available elsewhere (Manheim et al, 2006: 355). Elites are 'stakeholders' in the policy process who obtain 'elite' status as a result of their job role or their actions (Seldon, 1996: 353). The interviews countered problems with the reliability of statistical data in the UK and with a lack of publicly available data about partnered women and activation in Australia and Denmark. Further, through elite interviewing, the research examined how the policy problem 'representation' (Bacchi, 1999) in the three countries informed the policy responses. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 52 policy actors in 2009-2010 (see Table 1). The interviews were semi-structured and focused around key themes of roles, responsibilities, the rationale for the development of the policies and the intended and unintended outcomes. Where possible interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Due to political sensitivities, this was not feasible for the Australian government interviews and in this case detailed field notes were taken. Documentary analysis included records of parliamentary and committee debates, Green and White papers, discussion papers, annual reports, parliamentary-commissioned reviews and programme evaluations. Documents are cultural artefacts which constitute particular realities. Constructed on the basis of shared understandings, meanings and cultural assumptions (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004: 65) documents can be used by policy elites to shape and maintain policy paradigms, such as 'activation'.

Table 1 here

## **Findings**

Table 2 sets out the empirical findings according to the dimensions of recalibration (functional, distributive, normative, politico-institutional) and in the following sections these four dimensions are considered in detail.

Table 2 here

### *Functional recalibration: the broader contexts for the activation strategies*

In terms of social protection, the 1980s saw a recalibration of the UK welfare state towards increased targeting and means-testing. The Australian welfare state has been based on extensive means-testing and in the late 1980s there was a functional shift from passive social protection towards an 'active line'. This was gradually extended to parents

(mothers) in the 1990s and 2000s through three specific reforms: 'Working Nation' (1994), 'Australians Working Together' (2003) and 'Welfare to Work' (2006). Although in Denmark benefit eligibility has been functionally recalibrated by restricting access to benefits, the Danish model of generous income security has largely been maintained (Etherington and Ingold, 2012). Denmark introduced the 'right and duty' to activation in 1994, a key component of the 'flexicurity' model which has been gradually recalibrated towards a 'lighter' form of workfare (Goul Anderson and Pedersen, 2006). The '300 hours rule' introduced in 2006 represented a shift towards more neo-liberal workfare. In the UK activation began in the late 1990s, consolidated by the New Deal welfare-to-work programmes; some of these particularly targeted women, for example the 'New Deal for Partners' (1999). Such policies were linked with the functional recalibration of childcare, resulting in a combination of supply- and demand-side measures within a marketised model. In Australia relatively generous public subsidies for childcare contributed to the corporatization of the sector, although corporate failures have led to an increase in non-profit providers. By contrast, an important pillar of Danish flexicurity (Hansen, 2007) has been the provision of publicly-provided universal childcare.

Having set out the broader institutional contexts, the next section considers the distributive aspects of social security and activation policy reforms for partnered women.

#### *Distributive recalibration: gendered access to benefits*

In the UK partnered women have been able to receive unemployment benefit (Jobseeker's Allowance) or sickness-related benefit as 'workers', based on individualized contributions. However, approximately 350,000 partners have received support through the benefits system as 'dependent' partners of 'main benefit claimants', rather than as individuals - 70 percent of these being women (Department for Work and Pensions, 2008). In 1999 New Labour introduced a voluntary activation initiative targeted at this group: the 'New Deal for Partners of the Unemployed' (later renamed the 'New Deal for Partners'). The rationale for this reform (also seen in Australia) was that partners were not recognised within the institutional structure as potential labour market participants and were not within the remit of the public employment service (Taylor, 1998). In 2001 Labour introduced 'Joint Claims' for Jobseeker's Allowance for couples in which both partners were considered available for work (previously only one partner had been expected to enter work). The Welfare Reform Act 2009 extended this principle to couples with children aged seven and over. This was presented by the Department for Work and Pensions government officials as individualisation of benefits for couples (interview), but in fact constituted the individualisation of claiming and conditionality, but not benefit receipt.

Activation for partnered women is complicated by their derived access to benefit, producing tensions between familization (cementing women's ties to the family) and individualization (freeing women from the family) (Daly, 2011). For example, the main benefit claimant risked losing their benefit if their partner did not comply with the requirements of Jobcentre Plus (the agency which delivers employment services – see Table 1) – despite the partner herself not directly receiving benefit. Jobcentre Plus

Advisers highlighted the implications of the ideas underpinning this gendered access to benefits:

Engaging with partnered women is so difficult when they are not directly in receipt of benefits themselves, but we have to engage with them via their main claimant partner, who may not actually want their partner to work if they are looking after children or even the main claimant themselves (UK Personal Adviser)

In Australia 'Working Nation' (introduced in 1994) required partnered women to claim benefit in their own right, where previously (as in the UK) they had been treated as 'dependents' of their husbands or partners. Benefits were 'partially individualised', requiring individual claims and introducing individual and joint elements into the means test. In 2003 'Australians Working Together' introduced further work-related activity requirements for partnered (and lone) parents. From 2006 'Welfare to Work' required partnered parents to claim unemployment benefit (Newstart Allowance) and to undertake 15 hours of paid work per week once their youngest child became six. Previously, partnered parents could receive 'Parenting Payment' until their youngest child reached 16. Australian interviewees emphasised the importance of individual access to benefit as a foundation for activation policies: "If you want to engage with partnered women directly, they need to be recipients of income support" (former Australian government official).

However, the conditions attached to such individualised access were also important:

There has been a shift away from treating parents as a separate target group for assistance, which in some ways is probably desirable because there's quite a bit of heterogeneity amongst parents and treating them as a single category was never all that sensible, but in other ways I wonder whether we've gone a little too far because they have a particular set of needs (Australian advocacy organisation)

In Denmark the 2002 labour market reform reduced social assistance for some couples by introducing a 'spouse supplement' for female spouses ('homemakers') who were not considered to be actively seeking work. In 2005 the shift towards tighter conditionality was reinforced in a package of measures focused on the integration of immigrants, including *300 timers reglen* (the 300 hours rule) which replaced the spouse supplement. For married couples claiming social assistance both spouses needed to have accrued 300 hours (subsequently, 450 hours) of paid work in the last two years to continue receiving benefit. In ideational terms, the policy was framed as an economic incentive for both spouses to seek work, although 80 percent of those affected were women (Bach and Larsen, 2008):

This programme does not only provide for the housewife to get a job, it also gives economic encouragement for the husband to find a job...Now that they only have one social assistance, he also has a very good economic encouragement to go



out and find a job...So, it's a programme that enhances the availability of the other partner but also gives economic encouragement to get closer to the labour market (Danish Ministry of Employment official)

In all three countries activation for partnered women has been closely linked with changes in benefit entitlement. The UK policy trajectory has focused on increasing conditionality for partnered women and channelling them into activation programmes, but without partially individualising their benefit entitlement (and payment). The latter was achieved in Australia although the means test is still largely family-based. From 2013 UK benefits and tax credits will be integrated into a single 'Universal Credit'. This will *individualise* conditionality, but the benefit will only be paid to one household applicant, further entrenching existing asymmetries for partnered women (Bennett, 2012). The restriction is formal as couples may choose who receives the benefit but any change could involve significant disruption to household income (and a rational calculation). In Denmark the Social Democrat-led government elected in 2011 has committed to abolish the 300/450 hours rule but its legacy presents a challenge to the established social security principle of gender-equalising individualization (Hansen, 2007). In all three countries partnered women's access to benefits has been distributively recalibrated, reflecting changing (and contradictory) ideas of women as wives/partners, mothers/carers and (more recently) workers. This ideational conflict has resulted in differentiated activation and social security policies which embody a tension between the focus on the individual 'adult worker' and partnered women as 'dependents'.

#### *Normative recalibration: the framing of activation for partnered women*

In Australia the rationale for the activation policies was that partnered (and lone) parents as social groups were 'inactive' because they were not in paid work and were caring for dependent children. However, prior to 'Welfare to Work' government-commissioned research highlighted that around half of the target group was already undertaking voluntary work, studying or training in addition to caring activities (Alexander et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the framing reflected ideas about paid work as the only acceptable activity:

They kind of presented it in terms of good motherhood: now, to be a good mother, you should to be a working mother - it's the right thing to do by your children to bring in enough income to secure your family's long-term future (Australian advocacy organisation)

Similarly in the UK advocacy organisations raised concerns about the treatment of caring activities within the framing of activation: "The problem with the current and previous systems is that caring is not recognised as work, so work according to society has to be paid work" (UK voluntary sector organisation).

Danish activation has been based on a foundation of comprehensive childcare guaranteed by local authorities - and the assumption that couples will use such provision. However, this has created tensions between the commodification of care

which facilitates women's labour market participation and its capacity to limit women's own care choices - the latter forms a key critique of the Danish dual earner model (Borchorst, 2002). Couples in the UK have tended to pay high childcare costs as a percentage of net family income: 33 percent, compared with 10 percent in Australia and eight percent in Denmark (OECD, 2010, Schober and Scott, 2012).

Underpinning the 300 hours rule in Denmark was the idea that married women should be enabled to gain equality through the labour market. The context was the comparatively lower (50 percent) employment rates for immigrant women, compared with 80 percent labour force participation for all women (Statistics Denmark, 2012). As noted in the previous section the policy was not framed as a way of addressing labour market disadvantage but as an economic incentive to work. This was viewed positively by some frontline actors: "It's important for women to get out and get their own money and not be dependent on their husbands" (Danish Jobcenter employee). Social workers employed by local authorities have played a key role in employment services for social assistance recipients. These frontline actors, as well as non-governmental interviewees highlighted the difficulties of finding sustainable employment – an aspect not recognised in the policy design: "It's so difficult to explain the fairness in it...Nobody wanted to hire you and now we're taking away your money" (Danish social worker).

Frontline policy actors in both Australia and Denmark emphasized that prior to the most recent reforms they were making progress in assisting partnered women into work in a way which supported their existing circumstances and requirements. This was undermined by the imposition of seemingly unnecessary workfarist approaches:

The 'Welfare to Work' reforms could have been less focused on a work first approach and instead built on previous reforms which were making progress in moving partnered women into work – it was never going to happen overnight and the government implemented WTW before the previous reform had had a chance to make an impact (former Australian government official)

The issue of long term career progression was seen as being particularly important:

It seems not able to be responsive to the particular circumstances of individuals, nor to the context of the labour market in which they find themselves. So, the requirement to undertake compulsory unpaid work experience and/or take up training and/or go into paid work needs to be mediated by the opportunities available in the market and also the point in the pathway to work that the person is at (Australian advocacy organisation)

Similarly, in Denmark frontline staff held different perspectives and perceptions to policy officials regarding the effectiveness of activation programmes:

if you had a really good offer for this woman that is a special package for her and you say 'OK, you don't have to be on the labour market full-time' but she still says no and it is the husband who says no, before this law we could say they

didn't get any money. So we had the tools...They [policymakers] are not seeing the citizens. They have no idea...they can say 'There's nothing wrong with her, she can go out' and you meet her and say 'I wouldn't send her out'. It's easy to state these things when you are so far away (Danish social worker)

In all three countries activation for partnered women as a social group has been normatively recalibrated, reflecting ideas about labour market participation 'norms' - in Australia and the UK this has focused on mothers of school-age children. In Denmark the policy was based on the idea that immigrant women had a propensity to be 'homemakers' and to care for children at home, presenting a barrier to integration. The implication is that women not in work (and those within the benefits system, even as dependents) are 'other' than the majority of citizens. The gendered outcome of these ideas is that care is marginalized within activation policies, viewed as economically unproductive and 'economically irrational' (McDowell, 2005: 366).

*Politico-institutional recalibration: the gendered nature of programme delivery*

An important backdrop to the activation strategies for partnered women was the new governance arrangements streamlining the delivery of activation through 'one stop shops' and through contracts with non-state providers (see Table 2). In 1998 the Australian government privatised its employment services and introduced 'Job Network' (succeeded in 2009 by 'Job Services Australia'). In Australia the non-profit sector has played a greater role in programme delivery than in the UK and some organisations have been openly critical of programme design and sanctions (Finn, 2011: 4). However, many interviewees felt that the implementation of the 'Welfare to Work' requirements and the privatised delivery model had accelerated the 'work first' approach, compounded by providers' lack of experience of working with parents and the payment structures in the contracts. This led to gendered outcomes in which partnered women were pushed into short-term, often inappropriate jobs which undermined their own pathways into work. These factors were compounded by the policy design's lack of recognition of the availability of jobs that could accommodate caring labour:

The participation requirements seem to be very arbitrary and not based on any realistic analysis of the hours women can actually work outside of caring activities, or the work that is available for them. In terms of being able to help women find suitable work that fits with their childcare it's as frustrating for the providers as it is for the individuals (Australian employment service organisation)

The 'work first' policy design also did not accommodate training or up-skilling:

'Welfare to Work' has helped women who were really quite isolated...However, the work first approach means that if they were offered a job but were in education and training and declined that job, they would lose their payment...the policy did not take sufficient account of women's need for skills development (Australian employment service organisation)

In the UK the provider-led model introduced under New Labour and extended by the Coalition through the 'Work Programme' from 2011 had implications for employment opportunities for women:

The Jobcentre and private providers are becoming less interested in career routes and more in job outcomes and this is because they have to operate to meeting targets...Here, many partnered women who arrive at the Jobcentre have little prior work experience and low education qualifications and tend to be signposted to low-paid and low-quality jobs in the service sector (UK Personal Adviser)

In Denmark the public sector is both a key source of women's employment and an important provider of activation. However, job outcomes from local authority activation schemes tend to be lower compared with private sector-run activation (Ipsen and Hansen, 2009). While on local-authority-run activation schemes women may experience 'lock-in' and search less intensively for paid work:

We can see that local authorities are not performing as well as they could be in getting people back into the labour market and there is an element of 'lock-in' because of the restrictions and barriers people face in terms of looking for permanent employment once they get into some sort of activation programme (Danish local government official)

In Denmark women's work experience and educational qualifications have tended to be orientated towards public sector employment, so activation can result in the gendered outcome of reinforcing occupational labour market segregation (see Social Forskning Institut 2009: 55). In comparison, the 31 percent who found work after losing their benefit through the 300 hours rule were predominantly employed in full-time entry-grade and low-paid work, such as cleaning and other services (Bach and Larsen, 2008: 71, 83). The outcomes for many women were unknown, resulting in the implicit and gendered outcome that they exit the systems of support (including activation), without overcoming constraints on labour market entry and leading to potential longer-term exclusion.

The Australian government's evaluation noted a 32 percent decrease in claims for Parenting Payment Partnered (Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). Partnered women who obtained jobs worked an average of 22 hours per week, earning an average hourly wage of \$18 (above the minimum wage) (DEEWR, 2010), but also continuing to partially rely on benefits. In the UK partnered women usually moved into work following significant changes in their circumstances, such as improvements in the main claimant's health, a child starting school or someone else taking over caring responsibilities (Thomas and Griffiths, 2006: 25). Almost half of the job entries were 'elementary', followed by cleaning or care work (18 percent) and sales and customer service (16 percent) (Coleman and Seeds, 2006: 106). These jobs were part-time, with the couple receiving in-work benefits and many jobs were not sustained.

In all three countries the ideational push to move women into work and off benefits has led to the prioritization of 'work first' approaches and to women's gendered 'processing' through the social security and activation systems. In Australia and the UK employment service institutions have been recalibrated through marketization, with the intention of encouraging 'good practice' in the tailoring of services to specific groups. In their operationalization, the gendered outcome of these ideas was that women were pushed into already-feminised jobs, reinforcing gendered labour markets, deepening embedded economic inequalities (Grant, 2011) and closing off their access to education, training and up-skilling. The idea of marketisation has been less hegemonic in Denmark but the processing of women through the activation system has led to differentially gendered outcomes.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The value of the comparative approach taken within this study was its ability to provide deeper, ideational insights into the broader tendential features of welfare state restructuring. Such an approach also highlighted important differences between the supposedly similar models of welfare in Australia and the UK. It therefore drew attention to how neo-liberal policies have been shaped and re-shaped within the variegated contexts of the three countries.

Social security and activation policies have been functionally recalibrated in response to changes in the labour market and the family, based on the idea that women will normally be in paid work. These social changes are not new but raise important policy questions regarding *which* partnered women are problematized and *when* in their life course they are considered to be workers. These ideas regarding work and care were reflected in the distributive recalibration of the bases of entitlement and eligibility to benefit (Sainsbury, 1996), resulting in a contradiction between targeting this group as individuals within activation and their continuing treatment as dependents within social security policy.

In normative terms the idea of gender equality does not appear to have driven activation reforms for partnered women in Australia and the UK (see Annesley et al, 2010). In Denmark gender equality was purported to drive the 300 hours rule, reflecting a social welfare model which aimed to de-familise married women and promote gender equality through labour market participation. However, this had the opposite effect, marginalizing an already disadvantaged group of women rather than addressing their reasons for being outside the labour market. This suggested a complex interaction of ideas around work, family and nation, or ethnicity (Williams, 1995) in the construction of citizenship. In Australia it was notable that partnered women were already undertaking significant labour in the form of care. Thus, they were not necessarily without work: they were without paid employment, or without jobs. In the active welfare state policymakers considered caring to be a barrier to paid work and assumed that this can be overcome in a functional way. Women were expected to take up work and to find alternative caring arrangements to support this, but policies did not account for their preferred care choices (Duncan et al, 2003), which intersected with the job opportunities available. Parenting has been viewed as conflicting only with women's employment, with

insufficient attention being paid to men's earnings and attitudes (Schober and Scott, 2012).

In relation to politico-institutional recalibration, the data presented here highlighted the different representations of the policy 'problem' by government officials, those working at the frontline and non-governmental organisations. Senior policy officials constructed (and maintained paradigms) within which policies were framed and the capacity of 'street-level' actors to challenge, or adapt, such policies appeared constrained. This was compounded by the trend towards privatizing employment services, which was particularly pronounced in Australia and the UK. The UK Coalition government's Work Programme has placed responsibility on largely for-profit providers to achieve longer-term job outcomes. However, the context of gender-segregated labour markets and economic recession raise questions regarding both how they can ensure sustainable job outcomes and the types and quality of such work. 'Community' has been a core idea underpinning the Australian welfare model and has to an extent mediated tensions within the marketization of welfare (McDonald and Marston, 2002: 385). This reflects the different political paths taken in Australia, beginning with its origins as a 'wage-earners' welfare state (Castles, 1985) protecting the (male) wage, as in the UK. In the 1970s Australia under Labor pursued a path towards social democracy but this was thwarted by increasingly neo-liberal economic policies in the 1980s, consolidated by the Liberal government in the 1990s (Smyth, 2002). Despite attacks on labour rights in this period both the Australian labour movement and community services have retained a strength not seen in the UK context. However, although in Australia non-profit organizations have been important actors in service delivery, they did not appear to be capitalizing on this to challenge the gendering of activation.

Ideas influence the framing of policy problems and policy solutions. In employing recalibration as a heuristic device, Ferrera and Hemerijck (2003) did not make gender central to their analysis. This is an oversight as men and women have historically had differentiated relationships with the welfare state. The purported economic rationalism ascribed by the (male) adult worker model cannot be unthinkingly extended to women as it is based on a faulty assumption of gender sameness which overlooks the gendered division of paid and unpaid labour, women's lower levels of pay and propensity to work part-time (in Australia and the UK). Underpinning these aspects is the gendering of the interaction between welfare and the labour market. As the normative basis for a policy, the threat of removing benefit implicitly assumes that partnered women have no significant barriers to employment other than economic disincentives or lack of work motivation. It ignores demand-side factors such as the availability of work which can be combined with caring labour and gendered labour market inequalities (McDowell, 2003).

Activation policies which focus on *state* dependency through the benefits system - even if this is based on derived access - conceal gendered social relations both within and outside the family. The family has not necessarily changed as an institution in the way that policy ideas assume. In Australia and the UK activation policies for partnered women assumed that men could take on caring roles and they were framed in a formally gender-neutral way compared to those in Denmark. The explicit neutrality of policy language (and the formal assumption that men can be carers) diverts attention from the

implicit and informal gendering of the policies. Historically the universal Danish welfare state (and activation policies) has not singled out particular social groups. However, post-2001 Denmark has trodden the twin reform paths of neo-liberal workfare and social democracy, with increasing constraints on the role of the social partners. The 300 hours rule was an example of a suite of policies which reflected ideational policy change emanating from the influence of the anti-immigration Danish People's Party in the minority Liberal-Conservative coalition. Such policies posed a significant challenge to the Danish social welfare model premised upon gender equality and under the Social Democrats the future direction of activation is as yet unclear. A persistent issue for Danish activation is the gendered occupational outcomes within the public sector; in Australia and the UK such gendered outcomes have tended to be concentrated in low-paid work in the private sector, also the destination of many women affected by the Danish 300 hours rule.

Although activation ostensibly focuses on maximizing women's labour market participation it has been limited by the pathways presented to women. Notably, although many interviewees were critical of the policies, alternatives were seldom mentioned. This suggested that powerful 'cognitive locks' (Béland, 2009) were at play within the policymaking process, a product of the overarching neo-liberal order which has been underpinned and reinforced by the economic downturn and austerity-based policies. Examining the ideas informing the policies clearly revealed the implicit gendering of the processes governing the social security and activation systems in the three countries. In politico-institutional terms an avenue for future research is the role of frontline delivery agents and non-governmental organizations in mediating both the formal and informal gendering of activation. The intended outcomes of the policies focused on reducing the numbers of particular groups of benefit recipients. Such ideas did not focus on empowering women to participate in the labour market, or the benefits that they can bring to the workforce and to employers in the long-term. In future activation research more attention needs to be given to comparative *gendered* outcomes for both men and women and for the composition of workforces in different sectors. There is a need to 'engender' policy and to consider how paid and unpaid work is distributed and rewarded between men and women; the case for more rights for men is not one that makes obvious economic sense and as such is hard to promote within a neo-liberal frame (Annesley et al, 2010). In the context of potentially permanent austerity in which there may be insufficient (full-time) paid work for every adult worker, alternative ways of recalibrating social welfare and activation need to be considered.

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**Table 1.** The interviews

	UK	Australia	Denmark
	Government officials (3) Jobcentre Plus (4) Local authority (2) Non-governmental organisations (2) Trade unions (2) Think tanks (2)	Government officials (5) Employment service (6) Non-governmental organisations (3) Trade unions (1) Think tanks (3)	Government officials (5) Local authority (5) Non-governmental organisations (3) Trade unions (3) Think tanks (3)
Total	15	18	19

**Table 2.** The dimensions of gendered welfare recalibration for partnered women

	UK	Australia	Denmark
Functional recalibration  Responses to new and old social needs	Introduction of Jobseeker's Allowance (1996), followed by New Deals and 'Rights and Responsibilities' (1998)  Marketised childcare with subsidies	'Active line' introduced (late 1980s), followed by 'Mutual Obligation' (1996), extended to parents in 1990s/2000s  Marketised childcare with subsidies, but increasing role for non-profits following corporate failure	Shift from passive to active welfare following 1994 labour market reform and 'Right and duty' to activation  Comprehensive publicly-provided childcare
Distributive recalibration  Conditionality and targeted programmes	Differentiated access to benefits  Activation by benefit category, with increasing conditionality for parents  Jobs primarily in private sector	Partially individualised access to benefits  Activation by benefit category, increasing conditionality for parents  Jobs mainly in private sector	Differentiated access to benefits within individualised system  Activation for all, some targeting e.g. migrants and young people  Local authority-sponsored subsidised employment
Normative recalibration  Values and ideational underpinnings	Activation: individualised adult worker model  Social security: continuing model of dependent partner  Ideational assumptions about gender roles and paid and unpaid labour	Activation: individualised adult worker model  Social security: modified familization  Ideational assumptions about gender roles and paid and unpaid labour	Activation: individualised adult worker model  Social security: increased familization  Ideational assumptions about culture and ethnicity
Politico-institutional recalibration  Institutions and agencies involved in policy delivery	Centralised policy delivery framework  Department for Work and Pensions has overall policy responsibility  Administers benefits and	Federal, largely centralised policy delivery framework  Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations has overall policy responsibility  Contracts with Centrelink to	Decentralised policy delivery framework  Ministry of Employment has overall policy responsibility, National Labour Market Authority is responsible for activation  Local authority-run

	employment services through Jobcentre Plus  Work Programme: contracted services from private and non-profit providers for long-term unemployed	administer benefits  Job Services Australia: privatised employment services network includes for-profit and non-profit providers	Jobcenters administer benefits and deliver employment services  Services contracted from private sector, trade unions and unemployment insurance funds
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