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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the issues of intersectionality and quality in gendered employment policies in the UK. The question addressed is whether targeting groups at the intersection of gender with other equality strands improves the quality of policy.

Firstly, intersectionality is discussed with a focus on the concept of visibility. Previous work has shown that while the targeting of minoritised groups of women can be positive (in terms of examining the differential impact of policies and the particular issues faced by different groups), it can also be negative (by stigmatising these groups).

Secondly, the criterion for assessing the quality of policies is established; following the standards adopted by the EU and major civil society bodies, it is suggested that quality in employment policies can be ascertained by how far policy aims towards the transformation of gender relations in work.

These issues of intersectionality and quality are then brought together with a discussion of whether special programmes which target and make visible women at the intersection of gender with other equality strands are a 'good thing' in employment policy.

This involves an analysis of recent policy documents from the UK government, parliamentary debates and texts from semi-state and civil society actors.

An examination of government policy texts and debates shows that the primary aim seems to be toward ends other than gender equality, namely the alleviation of poverty at a household level. In the absence of an overarching vision of change in gender relations in employment, the quality of such policies is undermined and class inequality becomes the overriding concern.

Examples of 'doing intersectionality' where gender equality is kept in focus are discussed, drawing on texts from semi-state and civil society actors.

These analyses also demonstrate that making visible and addressing the economic inactivity of groups at the intersection of gender, social class and ethnicity involves tensions. A key tension is whether non-employment amongst women is approached as a matter of difference or whether it is seen as an outcome of discrimination.

The paper reaches the conclusions that: attention to intersectionality can potentially improve the quality of policy; identifying target groups and developing special programmes which make groups at the intersection of gender with other equality strands visible involves tensions; and that concern with groups at the intersection needs to go hand in hand with a wider mainstreaming towards the transformation of gender relations in work. If not, there is a danger of groups being unjustly targeted with the creation of 'double standards' and a situation where one equality strand becomes predominant over others.

1. Introduction

This paper addresses intersectionality in employment policy and its implications for the policy quality. Does recognition of the differences between women by factors such as social class and ethnicity improve policy quality or not? Quality is assessed by how far policy promotes *transformation* in gender relations in paid work and care work.

Addressing differences between women has long been a concern for feminists, with the recognition that the category of 'women' is highly differentiated according to ethnicity/religion, disability, age, social class and sexuality. Attention to these 'within group' differences, alongside the concern with 'between groups' gender inequalities, is reflected in recent research on women's position in employment. This work has variously highlighted

differences between groups of women according to social class, ethnicity and motherhood status in terms of, for example, rates of employment and pay (Dale et al 2006; Dex et al 1996, Platt 2006; Reynolds 2001; Walby 1997; Warren 2003).

The particular concern is with women's 'non-employment' or economic inactivity, that is, those women who are neither employed nor unemployed but who are out of the labour market either not seeking employment or unavailable to start work. Those women who disproportionately fall into this category include lone mothers; mothers of young children; other women who are unpaid carers; and women from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds. While the term 'economic inactivity' is the official categorisation, the term non-employment is preferred here, since, as feminists have long argued, women who do unpaid care work are 'economically active'. Non-employment amongst these women is though important in and of itself since participation in paid work is crucial for accessing economic and social capital, with long term consequences (e.g. on risk of poverty in later life) as well as having wider and less tangible but nonetheless important implications (e.g. in terms of independence).

As will be shown, employment policy in Britain does draw distinctions between the various groups of women who remain out of the labour market. The way in which this is achieved, and with what consequence for the quality of policy, will be discussed by building upon previous research which has pointed to some of the dilemmas associated with the recognition of different groups of women in other policy areas, particularly in relation to gender-based violence (Crenshaw 1991; Dustin and Phillips 2008). These include:
a) ambivalence, such that visibility of particular groups may show concern for important differences between women, but it may also serve to create negative stereotypes and stigmatise those women;
b) tension in the relations between strands, such as the emergence of dominant strands and conflict over goals pursued;
c) variation in the conceptualisation and implementation of strands that may have implications for policy quality.
These issues are explored in recent employment policy in order to assess the implications of intersectionality for policy quality.

2. Context and questions: employment policy, quality and intersectionality

Employment policy, gendered policy and gender equality

Employment policy is here broadly defined as encompassing the various interrelated areas which impact upon both rates of employment and the form of this employment, including: the structure of the tax and benefits system, and policies on child care and working conditions. In this paper, the specific interest is in the boundary between employment and non-employment or 'economic inactivity' amongst women. Women's participation in the labour market has been increasing over recent decades, but constraints, particularly for those women with caring responsibilities, remain. Policies from across the various areas have a particular impact upon whether and to what extent women can enter and maintain a continuous trajectory in paid work, as opposed to being 'economically inactive' and dependent upon the financial support of partners and/or state benefits. For example, the benefits system may legitimate the non-employment of particular groups by providing income support, or it may promote their employment by providing labour market activation programmes.

A distinction can be made between gendered employment policy and employment policy that is about gender equality. Employment policy is *gendered* in that it has different effects on women and men given that it is implemented in the context of existing gender inequalities.

For example, increased provision of public child care is associated with increases in women's participation, given that they constitute the majority of unpaid primary carers and that such provision has the effect of eroding one barrier to engagement in paid work. Policies that are not explicitly or directly about gender also have a gendered impact, whether positive or negative. For instance, the introduction of the national minimum wage had a large impact in narrowing the gender pay gap (Bellamy et al 2006; Women and Work Commission 2006).

While such policies can be considered as having gendered impacts, the policies may pursue a variety of goals, which may or may not include a concern with gender equality. Policy goals include: gender equality; social inclusion; economic growth and competiveness; cost saving by reducing 'dependency' on state benefits; ending (child) poverty; and compliance with international law. Some policies may pursue multiple goals simultaneously. For example, policies on the reconciliation of work and family life such as flexible work practices are often portrayed as offering 'benefits to all', where 'all' encompasses diverse groups such as employees and employers.

Since coming to power in Britain in 1997, a key plank of the Labour government's employment policy has been to pursue a programme of welfare reform which has restructured the tax and benefits system to target not only the unemployed but also the economically inactive. One of the central messages of this programme is that:

> Work is the main route out of poverty for all groups within society. **Work is good for you**: people who work are better off financially, better off in terms of their health and well-being, their self-esteem and the future prospects for themselves and their families. Work promotes choice and independence for people, supports our society and increases community cohesion.
> (Department of Work and Pensions 2007: 23 *Ready for work*)

Over the past decade or so, a series of 'New Deals' have been introduced, aiming to move various groups of benefit claimants off benefits and into some form of employment. Gradually the reach of these policies has been extended, beginning with long-term and youth unemployment, moving to the inclusion of lone parents, and to claimants of incapacity benefit. Low wage, often part-time employment is positioned as preferable to none, with incomes 'topped-up' through the tax system.

This programme of reform has been accompanied by other important changes in employment policy (more often than not driven by EU Directives and targets): lengthening of maternity and parental leave; introduction of paternity leave; introduction of a national minimum wage; and increased investment in childcare. A commission was also established to investigate the gender pay and opportunities gap (the Women and Work Commission), and there has been a restructuring of equality institutions with the creation of a single equalities body (the Equality and Human Rights Commission). A law integrating the multiple pieces of existing equalities legislation is expected to be passed in 2009.

The gendered impact of employment policy of the Labour government has been subject to much debate (e.g. Lewis and Campbell 2008; McKie et al 2001; Perrons 2005; Warren et al 2009), particularly the 'active labour market' or 'welfare to work' policies such as the New Deal. These programmes which promote employment amongst economically inactive groups have been criticised because the quality of employment on offer is often low in terms of pay and conditions (Haylett 2003). Here, the concern is with making a broader assessment of quality across policy in relation to intersectionality – with a particular angle on whether the message that 'work is good for you' is upheld for all groups of women or whether different visions of gender equality lie implicit within policy. The alternative visions are discussed next.

What is 'good quality' in relation to gender equality?

Assessing the quality of policy in relation to gender equality is a controversial issue, though possibly more so in the area of feminism and work given divergence in the meaning of gender equality. While in other areas such as gender based violence there may be, broadly speaking, consensus in the vision that policy needs to work towards, that is, the eradication of violence (though with much contention over how to get there), with regard to work the issue is not so clear cut. The different visions of gender equality can be summarised using the following typology: equal treatment based on assumptions of sameness between women and men (sameness); the equal valuation of different contributions by women and men (difference); and the transformation of gender relations (transformation) (Rees 2005; Walby 2005).

These different visions have been variously positioned in terms of the relation to the strategies used to reach equality; Some see linear, and possibly progressive, development through three approaches, from a concern with securing equal treatment moving to a struggle for the recognition of difference and special provision and, most recently, a recognition of the need for transformation in the structuring of society which incorporates a focus on men not only women. Others prefer to distinguish between vision and strategy, suggesting that various strategies or tactics may be used in order to reach, for example, transformation in gender relations (Booth and Bennett 2002; Rees 2005).

Here, the vision of gender equality adopted is that of transformation, with recognition that various strategies may be necessary in reaching such transformation. Sameness is rejected largely on the grounds that it assumes as unproblematic male patterns of work (e.g. an uninterrupted career trajectory), without consideration of care work, and how the former is reliant on the latter. The difference model is also rejected: first, and foremost, on the grounds that existing inequalities in patterns of work, which have far-reaching consequences in terms of women's economic / political / social positioning, are being misrecognised as outcomes of women's 'preferences' or 'choices'; and secondly, for its essentialist connotations. Women have choices, but these are socially constructed and constrained, as evidence over time within countries, and between countries, demonstrates. All too often, policies reinforcing difference end up supporting gender inequality; championing care work symbolically but offering inadequate rewards in terms of material resources.

In relation to women's non-employment, different visions of gender equality have different implications. To simplify, a difference vision suggests women's non-employment and disproportionate care work is legitimate, whereas holding a vision of transformation suggests that changes are required, on the part of both men and women, in the direction of greater equality in the distribution of paid work and care work. Following this vision demands that at the same time that women's employment increases, men's participation in care work also needs to increase such that the advantages and disadvantages associated with both are more evenly shared.

The matter of disputed visions will be returned to later when the issue of intersectionality is brought to bear upon question of quality, but for purposes of the paper, and following standards adopted by international bodies including the European Union, quality in employment policies is ascertained by how far a policy promotes transformation of gender relations in work towards greater equality in the distribution of paid and unpaid work between women and men; better quality aiming towards this change; poorer quality as accepting of, or reinforcing, existing inequalities.

What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality refers to the way in which an individual does not belong only to one social group (e.g. women) but is positioned at the intersection of several strands (i.e. ethnicity;

disability; age, religion/belief; social class; sexuality), and the ways in which strands cross and interact mean that there are important implications: whether a woman is white and middle-class, or black and working-class, matters in terms of positioning in relations of power and inequality. Recognising such differences can be crucial in terms of understanding differential impact of policies on different groups.

Intersectionality, or the recognition of the importance of differences between women, has a long history in feminist scholarship (Jakobsen 1998). Earlier work attended to gender and social class, looking at the ways social class shaped gender relations and vice versa. From the 1970s, there was concern with ethnicity in relation to both gender and class, often with consideration of the importance of the global level.

Crenshaw's (1991) work, particularly in relation to gender-based violence though also in employment, has been important in drawing attention to the negative impact of 'mainstream' policies and laws, modelled on the experiences of white women, on groups of minority women. She demonstrated the ways in which these women, whose experiences were mutually constituted through structures of racism and sexism, had been marginalised and excluded by the mainstream policies.

Walby (2007), drawing from and building upon previous theories of intersectionality, offers a different approach: mutual constitution; ontological depth, whereby each inequality is constituted across four domains: economy, polity, violence and civil society, and within each domain there exist multiple sets of social relations.

Here, the term 'strand' will be used in referring to particular set of social relations (e.g. gender / ethnicity) whereas a group is understood as always intersectional (i.e. a group is constituted at the intersection between strands, such that a group 'women' always further differentiable by ethnicity / age and so on). 'Intersectional group' will be the term used to refer to those groups named in policies which are described in terms of more than one characteristic. In other words, a policy may target a group on the basis of one characteristic or strand (identifying 'women') or there may be an 'intersectional group' targeted, such as 'women from minority ethnic groups'. The primary focus is on gender, as it intersects with ethnicity and social class, in employment policy. In addition, there will be consideration of the place of 'marital / family (or household) status' and religion since these are closely, though complexly, related to the three 'strands' in focus.

The paper brings together the issue of intersectionality with that of quality in the field of gendered employment policy in Britain; the key aim is to address the implications of intersectionality for the quality of policy. In reaching this aim, three questions are addressed:

i) Are groups at the intersection visible, and if so, does this mean the policy is of better quality?

The first question addressed is whether employment policies show recognition of intersectionality? It could be assumed that the greater the visibility of groups of women differently positioned along the equality strands the better, since the recognition of differences can lead to the development of policy which takes such differences into account. However, visibility brings risks, in terms of generalising and stereotyping (Moosa 2008; Strasser 2008).

The double edged character of visibility has been demonstrated in relation to recent policies on gender based violence amongst minority ethnic communities. The discourse of multiculturalism and its potentially negative implications for gender equality was relatively neglected in public and academic discourse until the 1990s (Dustin and Phillips 2008). Though, as Dustin and Phillips note, not neglected by civil society groups, such as Southall Black Sisters which was established in 1979 and campaigned on the issue of violence

against women in minority communities. Over the past decade or so, the issues of forced marriage, honour crimes and female genital mutilation have been increasingly visible in public debate, with legislation revised on FGM and developed on forced marriage.

At the same time as such developments can be viewed positively, there are concerns. As Dustin and Phillips (2008: 408) state: 'Inaction could be seen as racist, but then so too could action. Women were being abused, but so too were conceptions of 'culture'.'They note that minority communities became homogenised (with differences within groups minimised and differences between 'majority' and 'minority' magnified in a hierarchical relationship between 'advanced' western majority, and 'backward' non-western minorities) and denied agency in the ensuing public discourse. Forced marriage / honour crimes / FGM risk becoming positioned as a distinct 'cultural category' rather than as one facet of GBV, and the degree to which initiatives enacted to protect women were following an anti-immigration agenda continues to be debated. Despite these concerns though, Dustin and Phillips note that there is still a need to need to recognise the specificity of such crimes in order to effectively combat them. Thus, visibility is associated with tension: '…a preoccupation with abuses of women can feed a more xenophobic agenda, but the preoccupation also reflects urgent need' (Dustin and Phillips 2008: 420).

The aim here is to explore these issues with regard to employment policy: examining whether a concern with differences between women is present, and if so, whether such visibility constitutes a good thing in terms of the quality of policy, or whether it brings tensions similar to those identified in the policy area of gender-based violence.

ii) What are the relations between the strands; and are there competing agendas?
A further issue that has emerged in recent discussions of intersectionality is that of unequal relations between the strands. This concern was widely expressed in relation to the setting up of the new single equality body in the UK, which has a remit across gender, ethnicity/race, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion/belief (e.g. Fredman 2002; O'Cinneide 2002). It was feared that bringing together the various strands under one Commission may create a hierarchy, with some strands becoming dominant while others became over-shadowed.

It may also be the case that in cases of inequality, one strand receives disproportionate emphasis to its *disadvantage*. In analysing policies to combat gender-based violence amongst minoritised communities, Dustin and Phillips discuss the way policies can easily lead to the negative stereotyping of minority groups if issues such as forced marriage and FGM are not placed in the wider context as instances of gender-based violence. In such cases, ethnicity becomes more visible than gender.

However, giving equal weight to each strand could lead to tension. Assuming that strands share similar goals overlooks the degree of conflict in political interests that can exist; can a policy target groups that are at the intersection, and be 'amenable' to all the strands, or does this merely sidestep tensions which would be better dealt with through contestation and deliberation? (Crenshaw 1991; Verloo 2006) Relations between sets of inequalities in each domain can be positive, with the building alliances, but they can also be negative, with competition or active hostility (Walby 2007).

An additional complexity is that responsibility for equality between the various strands continues to be divided within government; despite the formation of the Government Equalities Office which takes a lead role on the overall equalities agenda, and primary role in terms of gender and sexuality, the department for Communities and Local Government takes the lead on religion and ethnicity. At the same time, responsibility for different aspects of employment policy is itself located across different departments, for example, policy on childcare now lies with the Department for Children, Schools and Families, a strategy on

carers with the Department for Health, whilst the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have taken the lead role in introducing the New Deal employment programmes. While the goals of one department may lead to the promotion of women's employment; the goals of another may dictate a preference for women to be engaged primarily as unpaid carers. This multiple location of policy areas and strands gives rise to further potential tension.

iii) How are the strands conceptualised and implemented in policy, and what implications does this have for the quality of policy?

It is not always obvious when an intersectional focus is present in policy; it is rare for the term 'intersectionality' to be used. Likewise, it is not always clear which strands are under consideration. In identifying intersectionality therefore, an awareness of the multitude of terms used is necessary, but does it matter which terms are used? Is it arbitrary, or does the choice of terms used matter? This is the third question explored in the current paper.

The significance of the use of gender-neutral terms has previously been discussed in relation 'work-life balance' policies (Lewis and Campbell 2008), as well as in policy on 'domestic violence' (Hearn and McKie 2008). Gender-neutral terms can obscure existing inequalities and undermine the pursuit of gender equality. However, in other contexts such 'de-gendering' has been conceived as a positive strategy (e.g. Lorber 2000). Thus, there is a certain ambivalence associated with 'de-gendering'. On the one hand, it can be a positive strategy in working towards greater equality (e.g. extending 'parental leave' in order to encourage the involvement of fathers); on the other, it can hide existing inequalities and deflect attention from the need to combat such inequalities. This paper will extend these discussions, by looking at the meaning of terms such as 'lone parent' in welfare reform policy and implications for the quality of policy.

Also considered will be the significance of the terminology used in referring to social class and ethnicity in policy. The term 'social class' is rarely (though possibly more so over recent years) used in policy documents. Instead, considerations of social class tend to be articulated by reference to, for example, 'poverty', 'disadvantage' or 'social exclusion'. In the case of ethnicity, it is common for policies to refer to 'ethnic minority' groups, sometimes drawing distinctions within this grouping. However, the close association between ethnicity and religion (Berthoud and Blekesaune. 2007) raises the question of whether or not both are referred to in policy. Or, is it the case that religion is outside the sphere of consideration, being 'off-limits', as in some policy on gender-based violence (Dustin and Phillips 2008).

In this paper, these complex issues of visibility, strand relations and strand conceptualisation and implementation in employment policy will be considered with a particular focus on the implications for policy quality of intersectionality between the strands of gender, ethnicity and social class.

3. Method

In order to address these questions, with the aim of assessing the relation between intersectionality and quality in employment policy, this paper draws from an in-depth analysis of central policy texts. These include policies on the tax and benefits system, childcare, work-life balance, and equal pay. Texts were selected by identifying key events or 'milestones', such as the setting up of commissions and the processes leading up to new laws. Actors who were responsible for as well as those contributing to the policies (i.e. government departments; semi-state bodies; and civil society organisations) were also identified. The documents analysed included government consultation papers, parliamentary debates, laws, and civil society texts.

With regard to the time period, 1997 is identified as a key turning point, with the Labour government coming into power and setting about a programme of welfare reform and other initiatives in employment policy that marked a departure (though how far is contested) from those pursued by the previous Conservative administration. Since the late 1990s, a series of changes have re-shaped the equalities landscape, including: a series of reforms to the tax and benefits system; the passage of new laws (e.g. gender duty; equality act); and the re-structuring of the institutions for equality with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission. For reasons of timeliness the most recent texts were selected, though earlier texts were included where these were of particular significance (e.g. marking a shift in policy).

4. Analysis and discussion

How far are differences between women recognised in employment policy?
The groups of non-employed women most visible in employment policy are those at the intersection of gender with marital /family status and gender with ethnicity with the naming of two groups: lone parents and minority ethnic women. In Britain, both lone parents and women from particular minority ethnic backgrounds have been 'target groups' for government policy due to their low rates of participation in paid work. In addition, from 2005 the under-representation in public life of women from particular minority ethnic groups was subject to research and campaigns by the (previous) semi-state body for gender equality, the *Equal Opportunities Commission* (2007a; 2007b), and by the civil society feminist organisation *The Fawcett Society.*

Following the announcement of the New Deal for young people, programmes were rolled out to help other groups facing exclusion from labour market, including lone parents. The concern with the non-employment amongst women from some minority ethnic groups came to the fore soon after. In 2001 the Prime Minister asked the Performance and Innovation Unit to undertake a project on improving labour market performance of minority ethnic groups, which noted the 'clear gender differences in educational and labour market outcomes *within* ethnic minority groups' and expressed concern that 'few policies are sufficiently fine-grained to deal with an ever more complex pattern of ethnic differences, and associated gender and class differences' (Cabinet Office 2001). This was followed by a series of reports coming from the Cabinet Office and the Department for Work and Pensions (e.g. Heath 2001).

In terms of special programmes to promote employment[1] amongst these groups of women, in October 1998 the lone parent was New Deal launched to promote employment amongst non-employed lone parents in receipt of income support. Since the launch, increasing conditionality has been attached to the receipt of income support with parents moved onto Jobseekers' Allowance once their children reach a particular (and increasingly younger) age. Although mainstream services offered through Jobcentre Plus and the New Deal programmes have been the key means for improving employment rates amongst minority ethnic groups, from 2002 the DWP ran various pilot projects aimed at specifically ethnic minorities or their potential employers (NAO 2008). These included Ethnic Minority Outreach (2002-2006), Specialist Employment Advisors (2004-06) and Partners Outreach for Ethnic Minorities (2007- continuing). The latter programme aims to support non-working partners from low income families, and was initially planned to run for 15 months but has been extended (to CHECK current position). Aston et al (2009: 21) note that the programme was conceived with the particular aim of supporting *female* partners into work

In a recent consultation papers on welfare reform, both lone parents and women from minority ethnic groups are identified as target groups. In the green paper *In work, better off* (DWP 2007: 8), the stated aims include:

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[1] History of New Deal: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/docs/PMNewDeal2-01-08.pdf

move more people on inactive benefits into work, particularly those who have been on benefits for a long time. Realising our ambition requires a reduction of one million in the number of incapacity benefits claimants; and an increase of 300,000 lone parents and one million older people in work;

increase employment among ethnic minority groups. Although the gap has narrowed since 1997, ethnic minorities still have an employment rate 14 percentage points lower than the national average and high levels of child poverty. We need to do more to encourage participation and tackle discrimination, particularly for women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin;

It continues (*In work, better off* DWP 2007: 27):

Although it is improving, the situation for many ethnic minorities remains challenging. Overall they are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white people and one and a half times more likely than the overall working age population to be economically inactive. The employment rates for some groups are exceptionally low: the employment rates for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are only 27.6 per cent and 26.4 per cent respectively.

In the subsequent white paper *Ready for work* (DWP 2007: 27)

We know that some people in society face greater employment challenges and we want to support them to overcome these. This means increasing the opportunities for those identified as our key target groups: disabled people, older people, lone parents, people from ethnic minorities, those living in the poorest areas, people with low or no qualifications and socially excluded groups.

Later, attention is drawn to the particularly high rate of non-employment amongst minority ethnic women:

The overall inactivity rate for ethnic minority women is 41 per cent, which rises to 65 per cent for Pakistani, and 67 per cent for Bangladeshi, women. Many of these women want to work, but relatively few are in contact with Jobcentre Plus or other mainstream services. (DWP *Ready for Work* 2007: 77)

Below, the question of whether the visibility of these groups of women has positive implications for the quality of policy will be discussed, with consideration of those groups who remain somewhat invisible, or for whom non-employment is positioned as 'acceptable.'

Visibility and ambivalence
In terms of establishing that women should be able to participate in the labour market, whether lone parents or minority ethnic women, these policies could be interpreted positively, as one step towards removing the barriers that prevent greater gender equality in rates of participation in the labour market.

To some degree, this does seem to be the case, in so far as a focus on lone parents' non-employment has gone alongside recognition that lack of child care is a major barrier to entering workforce. Until childcare becomes more available and accessible, then the government's case for coercion through increased conditionality of benefit payments is weakened. This, in turn, has positive implications for other women, in terms of for example, an increased supply of childcare and financial support (as far as it goes, relative to situation pre Labour, no doubts that it has improved). In relation to the non-employment of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (Aston et. al. 2007) has highlighted the specific difficulties experienced by these women in

attempting to gain employment (e.g. discrimination, language barriers, poor health) as well as the degree of diversity amongst these women (e.g. by age).

However, there seems to be an acceptance of, if not support for, the 'inactivity' amongst *other* groups of women. (e.g. white, potential second earners in couple relationships; carers of adults) An early report taken from a series of key papers laying out the Treasury's welfare reform programme from 1999 declared:

> **The Government believes that all women should be able to choose the balance of work and family life which best suits them, whether they decide to care for their children full-time or continue in paid work after the birth of their children.** But for a long time the lack of decent and affordable childcare, weak employment protection and rigidities in the tax and benefit system have combined to erect barriers to women who wanted to combine motherhood and work. Although the number of women choosing to combine work and motherhood has increased dramatically, mothers with lower levels of education have faced greater obstacles.
> *(The modernisation of Britain's tax and benefit system, Number four: Tackling poverty and extending opportunity,* 1999: 45)[2]

Though explicit statements supportive of 'women's choices' are less common in recent publications from the government, with an acceptance of some women's non-employment more frequently implied by an absence of discussion (and absence of special programmes), instances can nevertheless be found. In 2005, the government consultation paper on the Work and Families Bill declared:

> Parents are the best people to make decisions about the interests of their children. The Government's role is to support families and to ensure they have meaningful choices about how they live their lives. This means enabling parents to spend time with their children, particularly during the first year of their child's life, encouraging flexible working, providing joined up support and advice, and increasing the availability of high quality childcare provision.
> (*Choice and flexibility,* Department for Trade and Industry, 2005: 12)

A parliamentary debate on the Work and Families Bill began with the Minister's message that flexible working offers benefits for all:

> This Government back Britain's families and back Britain's businesses. Those aims are not mutually exclusive, but mutually supportive. Flexible working raises employment levels for our economy, widens the talent pool for business and improves people's standards of living. It enables parents and other carers not only to stay in work, but to advance at work as well. It seeks to ensure that every child gets the best possible start in life.
> (Alan Johnson, 5th December 2005, House of Commons)[3]

However, when challenged later in the debate by a member of the Conservative Party:

> **Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** I hope that the Secretary of State will not finish his introductory remarks without placing on record his appreciation of mothers who decide to stay at home to bring up their children. Where in the Bill are there

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[2] http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/734F8D63-BCDC-D4B3-1A9CD199A7DF8D3E.pdf
[3] http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo051205/debtext/51205-15.htm#51205-15_spmin0

proposals to improve their pension entitlements when they eventually retire, perhaps after going back to work once their children have grown up?

Alan Johnson: They are not in this Bill, but they are in the Turner report, and we will have to wait for the response to Turner. *As I said earlier, the Bill is about genuine choice. If a mother's genuine choice is to stay at home with her child, that is fine— that is exactly as it should be.* However, we do not want women being forced to stay at home because they have no alternative and having to give up their career. Nor do employers want that; it is bad for society and for the employment market in general, but it happened quite regularly before these measures were introduced.
The purpose of the Work and Families Bill is to respond to (these) changing patterns of employment to ensure that parents and others with caring responsibilities have genuine choices about how they balance their work and family life, to ensure that children get the best start in life, and to help business benefit from the widest possible talent pool.

Further evidence that the government largely supports a policy of 'choice' for other groups of women is found in the report of the Women and Work Commission's investigation into the gender pay and opportunities gap. While this report acknowledges women's concentration in part-time low paid positions, its criticism focuses largely on the lower pay and lower level of such employment; not that women's disproportionate representation in part-time jobs is in itself about inequality in terms of the distribution of unpaid care work and paid work (Women and work commission; critiqued by Fawcett society).

We do not want to restrict choice, and acknowledge that some women will continue to want to take substantial periods out of the labour market after having children. However, we do want to reduce the pay penalties associated with these choices, which reflect the fact that women's skills are being underutilised and productivity for the UK economy is lost.
(Women and Work Commission, 2006: 33)

The preference for a policy of choice on the part of the government was also implied by Lisa Harker (2006) in her influential report for the Department of Work and Pensions on combating child poverty. Harker notes the lower level of poverty amongst dual earner couples as compared with couple households where only one partner is in employment (and where the majority of those partners not in employment are women). However, she also notes that promoting dual earning as a route out of poverty would be unlikely:

The Government will be wary of promoting dual earning as the only route out of poverty but rather want to acknowledge the need for families to choose the working pattern that best suits their circumstances.
(Harker 2006: 49).

Another group of women whose under-participation in paid work remains somewhat invisible is that of women who are 'carers'; recent statistics show that 26% of claimants of Carer's Allowance (income replacement benefit) were male, and 74% female.[4] The Work and Pensions Committee (2008) report is critical of the existing system on the grounds of its complex benefits and lack of support for carers to re-enter the labour market.

Within the area of childcare, choice also figures strongly. For example, a recent strategy document on childcare (2009) implies that, contrary to other research evidence, parents are

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[4]

http://www.carersuk.org/Policyandpractice/PolicyResources/Policybriefings/CarersAllowanceStatistics Aug08.pdf

not restricted by costs in terms of use of childcare but that non-use is the outcome of (positive) choice:

> The most common reasons given for not using childcare reveal a strong preference among parents to look after children themselves, either out of a sense of duty that it is the right thing to do or because they want to. When parents who had not used any childcare in the last year were asked why, nearly 80 percent answered this was because they would rather look after their children themselves or rarely need to be away from them (2009: 80).

Drawing together these analyses would seem to suggest that the general policy position on women's employment is that *some* women *should* be in the labour market (those claiming benefits; those living in household poverty), for others it is a matter of choice (carers; non-claimants, living in households deemed not in poverty, assumed to be financially supported by partner). Returning to the earlier discussion of the quality of gendered employment policy then, current policy seems to only partially promote greater equality in terms of participation in the labour market; full equality across employment for women seems an elusive goal with the promotion of a vision where there is limited transformation in gender relations and an acceptance of difference in which women continue to do the bulk of the unpaid care work.

If the policies on welfare reform were about full employment amongst women, or maybe economic efficiency and broader social inclusion, and following the key message that 'work is good', then it would be expected that *all* women of working age- across different classes and ethnicities- who are economically inactive would be targeted. Instead, the government appears to promote work as being 'good' only, or particularly so, for some groups. In other words, it does not appear to hold a consistent pro-employment position; the message that 'work is good for you' does not seem to be equally relevant for all women. The visibility of groups of women at the intersection of the strands of gender, ethnicity and social class is *selective.* In the next section, it will be suggested that the primary concern of these policies is not gender, nor ethnicity, but household poverty and costs in terms of benefits.

Hierarchical relations and competing agendas
Class, household poverty, benefits and agendas?
An examination of the documents reveals more of concern with social class, or rather more specifically, poverty at the level of the household, than with gender inequality and/or inequality by ethnicity; the latter coming into focus only where they intersect with poverty, particularly child poverty. The concern with workless households rather than specifically workless *individuals* is evidenced by the range of New Deal programmes that the government has since introduced, possibly most clearly by the 'New Deal for Partners' which, rather than being a generic programme for all non-employed partners in couple households as the title suggests, specifically targets economically inactive partners of benefit claimants.

Underlying the drive to combat worklessness is household and particularly child poverty. In the presentation of a recent green paper in parliament, the secretary of state for Work and Pensions, Peter Hain, stated that the targets were full employment and the eradication of child poverty, the latter which 'lies at the heart of the paper' (18 July 2007).[5] The target of 'full employment' is defined more carefully in the consultation paper (DWP 2007: 26) as 'high

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[5] http://www.publications.parliament.uk/cgi-bin/newhtml_hl?DB=semukparl&STEMMER=en&WORDS=minor%20ethnic%20women%20employ&ALL=minority%20ethnic%20women%20employment&ANY=&PHRASE=&CATEGORIES=&SIMPLE=&SPEAKER=&COLOUR=red&STYLE=s&ANCHOR=70718-0004.htm_spmin0&URL=/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm070718/debtext/70718-0004.htm#70718-0004.htm_spmin0

and stable levels of employment with employment opportunity for all' and the ministerial foreword to the paper closes with the statement 'Our welfare commitment remains: tackling poverty through full employment.'

Consultation papers which address the high rates of non-employment amongst lone parents and minority ethnic women emphasise the link with child poverty. For example:

> Helping more lone parents into work is vital if we are to eradicate child poverty by 2020.
> (*Ready for Work* 2007: 23)

> The overall inactivity rate for ethnic minority women is 41 per cent, which rises to 65 per cent for Pakistani, and 67 per cent for Bangladeshi, women… These high inactivity rates are paralleled by a very high incidence of child poverty, with two-thirds of Pakistani children, and three-quarters of Bangladeshi children, living in poverty
> (*Ready for Work* 2007: 77)

In *Raising expectations and increasing support: welfare reform for the future* (2008: 17):

> The central purpose of our welfare reforms is to increase employment to release resources for our principal social justice priority: the eradication of child poverty by 2020.

The targeting of lone parents, and women from particular minority ethnic groups, thus appears to be primarily driven by the concern to combat poverty, and particularly child poverty, rather than being concerned with women's participation in the labour market in itself as a matter of equality.

The predominance of combating poverty can be seen in other employment policy, including policies on childcare. In an early green paper on childcare, there were clear links made between the provision of childcare and enabling mothers' employment (1998), and the paper itself was presented to parliament by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and the Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister for Women. (Likewise in 2002, more focus on mothers). By 2009, in an update on the National Childcare Strategy from 2004, (the paper positioned in the foreword alongside the government's paper on social mobility), the role of quality child care as a compensatory or levelling mechanism has become central, with early learning and childcare services positioned as having the 'potential to narrow gaps between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers and transform life chances' (2009: 8).

The concern with poverty is, of course, inextricably linked with costs for government in relation to benefit payments. The desire on the part of government to drive down these costs, or at least limit, is implied in a recent report from the House of Commons Committee on Public Accounts (2008). The report examines initiatives to increase the rate of employment amongst ethnic minorities, and includes discussion of the Jobcentre Plus 'Job Outcome Targets'. According to the report, these were introduced in order to allow improvement in the assessment of employment programmes. Five priority groups are identified, and those with the highest points are jobless lone parents and disabled benefit claimants, those with the lower points are employed customers. The report states that nearly half of non-employed ethnic minority fall into the fourth priority group (low number of points attached to job outcome for those falling in this group) meaning that there are limited incentives to help this group into employment. The Department for Work and Pensions rationale for the structuring and points system is that it encourages attention to focus on those groups furthest from the labour market. However, given the evidence of the extent of the barriers facing groups such as minority ethnic women, it can be asked whether the

targets reveal that concern lies primarily with: one, combating child poverty (given that jobless lone parents fall into the first priority group whether claiming inactive benefit or not) and two, reducing the number of benefit claimants.

However, in looking across other groups who are non-employed the extent of concern on the part of government for poverty seems questionable. The position of carers of disabled adults appears difficult for the government, employment policy up to now preferring to avoid entering discussion about this group's relation to labour market. A recent Work and Pensions Committee (2008) report however does draw attention to this group- and the way it is excluded from, for example, active labour market programmes. A shortage of alternative care provision to enable greater participation in paid work amongst carers suggests the influence of budgets; that providing such alternative care might be seen as more costly than continuing to pay (a poverty) 'wage' to carers in the form of the carer's allowance.

It seems then that the prioritisation of strands is accompanied by the pursuit of different agendas. In the case of carers, it may be one of cost limitation, but it seems that there other agendas being followed too. At the same time as the Department for Work and Pensions are promoting employment amongst minority ethnic women in what appears to be an effort to drive down poverty in minority ethnic groups, the Communities and Local Government department sought the views of the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group in a drive to combat 'violent extremism'. A statement from the department declared:

> Hazel Blears believes that women have always had an invaluable role at the heart of their families, their communities and wider society; *this is especially true for Muslim women. As mothers, daughters, sisters, wives they bind their families together. As local leaders, they make their communities stronger…* Muslim women often have a unique moral authority at the heart of families to influence and challenge the false and perverted ideology spread by extremists and give our young people the skills and knowledge to turn their backs on hate.[6]

Whilst, of course, this does not preclude employment also, it does seem to suggest a more 'traditional' role for women, with the priority placed on social cohesion and good community relations. This analysis suggests the existence of a hierarchy between the strands, with the priority attached to combating poverty, particularly child poverty. Competition can also be seen in terms of different 'agendas' across government, which may shift over-time. The above discussion implies that one dominant agenda is to combat poverty, co-existing with a concern to limit government spending, together with others, such as a desire to promote cohesion.

Strand conceptualisation and implementation
De-gendering
In suggesting that the primary concern is with poverty, then the 'de-gendering' of the category lone parents (found throughout the consultation papers and in much of the debates on welfare reform) becomes *meaningful* in the sense that de-gendering here seems reflective of the fact that the concern of policy is not primarily with gender, but with poverty.

With regard to minority ethnic women's non-employment, there tends to be inconsistency in terms of whether or not its gendered dimensions are acknowledged. On the one hand, there are examples (as cited above) where it is specifically *women* who are named. However, at times there is a slide to referring only to ethnic minorities with scant recognition of the strongly gendered patterns in non-employment amongst different groups (e.g. House of Commons Committee report 2008, and a National Audit Office report 2008). In addition, the

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[6] http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/554064

Partners' Outreach for Ethnic Minorities programme which was, as noted above, intended to specifically target female partners, in practice almost half of those recruited were men (43%) (Aston et al 2009: 60).

The importance of de-gendering here is that gender becomes invisible: that those who are being targeted are largely women and mothers becomes obscured; if this was visible, then the existence of double standards would become more apparent, as would the fact that it is largely women rather than men who continue to be excluded from the labour market, and who are living in poverty.

These processes of de-gendering appear to be accompanied by a shift away from recognition of the specificities of minority ethnic underemployment, towards a broader emphasis on 'disadvantaged communities' (e.g. Department of Work and Pension's 'City Strategy'). This is seen in the shift in strategy of the DWP, from running pilot programmes on ethnic minority employment towards a more generic strategy targeting wider disadvantaged communities with greater local control over projects. In a review of these strategies, the National Audit Office (2008) sounded a note of caution. In their view, while local control may bring positive changes, there is a risk that money may be allocated in such a way that minority ethnic groups do not receive an appropriate share. This shift then, with decreased attention to specifically inequalities associated with ethnicity, seems to parallel the de-gendering, with both trends prioritising poverty showing only indirect concern for inequalities by gender and ethnicity.

'Poverty'
With regard to the terms used to refer to social class, as discussed above, poverty at the level of the household is the primary concern. In this way, the term 'lone parent', and to some degree, that of ethnic minority, is perhaps better understood as a 'shorthand' means of referring to those 'households at risk of poverty' where gender and ethnicity become important in the degree to which they intersect with poverty. This precludes consideration of the extent to which poverty is *gendered*. If ethnicity begins to slip out of view, as is suggested by the shift towards a focus on 'wider disadvantage', then the disproportionate number of minority ethnic groups living in poverty will also become obscured.

In addition, the particular way poverty is conceptualised in policy, at a household level, means that *within* household inequalities, which are strongly gendered, become neglected. At the same time, the use of a threshold concept of poverty, with the concern for 'lifting' groups out of poverty (and topping up incomes via tax system), means that social class in sense of relations of *inequality*, and narrowing gaps between rich and poor, disappears.

Ethnicity or religion?
As discussed above, the policy documents identify groups of women who are not in the labour market on the basis of ethnicity, with reference to women from minority ethnic groups, particularly Bangladeshi and Pakistani women. However, research (some commissioned by the DWP), discusses the blurring of the boundary between the factors associated with ethnicity, and those relating more to religion (Berthoud and Blekesaune 2007; Dale et al 2006). Other government departments also raise the potential role of religion. In the Communities and Local Government third *Race Equality in Public Services* report, the various initiatives aimed at tackling 'economic inactivity' are discussed. In describing the Partners' Outreach for Ethnic Minorities programme, included in the possible barriers to participation is: 'resistance from family and community, arising from religious and cultural traditions' (CLG 2009: 55).

This raises the question as to why religion remains relatively absent in employment policy. One potential explanation is that it could be associated with the tensions involved in bringing some strands together (as witnessed in cases such as sexuality / religion), and/or strategic.

It may be that greater adherence to 'traditional' gender roles amongst some religious communities with an expectation that women will perform a caring role present a barrier to women's greater participation in employment (Dale et al 2006). At the same time, however, there is a need to combat stereotypical views implying that this is *necessarily* the case, suggesting that an absence of the consideration of religion may be more strategic. In campaigning on equality for minority ethnic women, the former commission for gender equality the *Equal Opportunities Commission* attaches priority to combating discrimination:

> There is an urgent need to move away from simply focusing on the cultural and religious differences that may be holding some ethnic minority women back from working at all to recognising the widespread, subtle but nonetheless powerful barriers which are preventing many ethnic minority women who do want to work from joining a workplace or thriving in it (EOC p.4).

In the EOC campaign, the focus on external barriers can be viewed as a useful and strategic intervention that serves to counter homogenisation and stereotyping of women from minority ethnic groups, directing attention to the role of employers and wider society in the exclusion of women from the labour market. However, it may be questioned whether there is also a risk of making a similar mistake in relation to religion as was previously made in relation to ethnicity in case of gender based violence, where violence amongst minority ethnic communities became silenced for fear of further racism (Crenshaw 1991). In other words, motivated by a desire to respect religious diversity and avoid homogenisation, it could it be that existing inequalities become overlooked with a closing down of discussion of the potential tensions between the strands of gender and religion. If this is the case, then it raises the question – outside of the scope of the current paper- of how such tensions could be tackled.

5. Conclusions: fragmentation, competing agendas, and inconsistency

Overall, the analysis shows that there is a lack of coherence in the conceptualisation of gender equality in employment policy. Elements of an agenda of transformation are present to some degree (e.g. increased childcare, promoting women's participation in employment) but co-exist with an acceptance of women's difference (in their role as primary carers, and in their over-representation in part-time jobs). This seems patterned, with certain visions for certain groups.

There are different visions of gender roles for different groups of women, according to household type, ethnicity, whether in poverty, and care responsibility. In turn, the 'ideal' visions appear influenced by the agendas of government departments. Agendas, such as the target to cut rates of child poverty, seem to lead to the identification of particular groups as the focus for policy.

For some groups of women, there seems to be increasing coercion into employment (lone parents), or at least employment amongst these groups is encouraged (minority ethnic women). But employment here appears to be more about alleviating (child) poverty and limiting costs in terms of benefit payment. For other groups of women, choice is promoted (couple families) or, at the least, there is an implicit 'acceptance' of non-employment (e.g. amongst full time carers). Using a framework of choice overlooks the constraints on these women's employment and the ways their 'choices' are socially structured in current conditions of gender *inequality.*

Policies are not currently situated within a wider drive towards gender equality with one vision of transformation for all women, inclusive of differences across privileged and less privileged groups. Rather, there is a tendency to address gender at the intersection with

other strands only when the group in question is of interest in reaching the aims of other agendas: meaning that some groups of women become visible while others do not.

The drive to recognise particular groups facing particular barriers goes hand in hand with *insufficient* attention to barriers facing *all* women and where overall patterns of non / under-employment are not seen as problematic. Therefore, special programmes are initiated in the absence of mainstreaming of *transformative* policy.

Theoretically, intersectionality is concerned with relationality, social relations between more and less powerful groups. However, in policy, intersectionality tends to become reduced to static categories such that relationality is lost, with the focus only on empirical 'boxes' of e.g. lone parent or group at risk of poverty- ignoring the 'other side' (e.g. whiteness / privilege / men).

Intersectionality in employment policy is selective, with negative implications in terms of quality in relation to gender equality. There is the targeting of only some women who are located at intersection of gender / class and ethnicity, with combating poverty taking priority and equality by gender and ethnicity dropping from view. For quality gender employment policy, then policies that target particular groups of women need to be conducted in the context of a wider policy 'agenda' that works toward a transformation in gender relations, promoting employment amongst all groups of women, across social class and ethnicities, and promoting care amongst all groups of men.

The presence of intersectionality, of the recognition of the specific barriers facing some groups of women, is inconsistent. There is the naming and making visible only of certain groups, specifically those who are claimants of specific benefits and / or living in households in poverty. In this identification of some target groups for active labour market programmes rather than others, there is risk of stigmatisation of those groups that are made visible, with a potential slide into a 'moral' message of work being 'good' for particular groups with negative consequences in terms of how those groups are perceived. At the same time, other women, including mothers in couple households not in poverty have 'choice' and still others, women who are 'carers' who are excluded from participating in the labour market given the lack of alternative services, are largely hidden from view.

The situation is one of double (or triple) standards; paid work is seen as a good thing for some groups of women (lone mothers claiming benefits, women from minority ethnic groups), while 'choice' is accepted or even promoted for other groups of women, and some women seem to be simply neglected. On the one hand, the government is increasingly coercive in terms of forcing some groups into the labour market; while on the other hand, it promotes choice for others- choice in how to balance or reconcile family and work. In this way, non-employment amongst some women becomes legitimate – and somewhat hidden from view- while non-employment amongst others is deemed unacceptable.

In terms of the vision of gender equality pursued then, while on the surface the drive to promote employment may appear to be working towards some transformation / or at least sameness, on closer examination appears to be more accepting of difference, or rather the status quo of women fulfilling the role of primary carers. In the long-term, it is conceivable that in different circumstances policies which do have the effect of promoting women's employment – albeit as an indirect means of reaching another goal- could be substituted by policy which does not have this effect, potentially having a negative impact on the pursuit of transformation in gender relations in work.

This is not meant to imply that a good quality policy requires recognition of all 'intersectional groups', this may be practically difficult if not impossible. Rather, if particular groups are to be targeted then this needs to be in the context of a wider concern for gender equality

inclusive of women in general. This would then mean that lone parents, just as mothers in couple households, and women from ethnic minority groups, just as white women, are seen as equally expected to be in the labour market as men. Though of course, such a strategy would not necessarily be without tensions, as indicated in the above discussion of the place of religion alongside a strategy of transformation in gender relations. This strategy would also require consistency across and within government departments ('joined up' government) pursuing one vision of gender equality.

A wider programme pursuing an agenda of gender equality would, in turn, require the recognition of the barriers that continue to restrict women's participation in the labour market, not only the lifting of specific barriers affecting particular groups. It would entail a much greater undertaking than providing resources that enable 'some' employment (e.g. an entitlement to a limited number of hours childcare) with greater potential consequences in terms of moving towards 'full' gender equality. This would not preclude consideration of the specific barriers that only some groups of women do confront (e.g. mothers of disabled children) and special programmes to combat these; rather, these would run alongside a wider programme to promote gender equality in work.

The suggestion then is that specific programmes and the targeting of particular groups of women who are most disadvantaged in terms of their access to the labour market is not, in itself, a 'bad thing'. The problem is that these initiatives are not conducted within the context of a more generic drive towards gender equality in government policy. [7]

That employment is being promoted for particular groups of women on the basis of combating poverty rather than in the interests of reducing inequalities of gender and/or ethnicity means that the existence of these inequalities by gender and ethnicity, and the causes and consequences of these inequalities, begin to drop out of the picture, except where they intersect with a dependence on state benefits and / or poverty at level of household. Even then, the gendered and ethnicised dimensions of poverty become obscured by the use of 'neutral' terminology such as lone parents and 'disadvantaged communities'. It is as though in tackling poverty, there is the assumption that all inequalities will be tackled, which assumes the same causes, and other inequalities as being derivative from class.

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[7] An analogous case found in the law on FGM discussed by Dustin and Phillips (2008) where the law allows exemption for cases of surgery described as 'trimming' where necessary for girls' 'physical or mental health'; in effect allowing 'cosmetic cases' following the influence of majority cultural norms, but not on grounds of 'custom / ritual' stemming from minority cultural norms. Even more contentious is case of adult women: how can surgery for adult women be outlawed for 'cultural reasons' in the context of an increasing amount of surgery for 'cosmetic reasons'?

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