



Understanding Social Change

Promoting welfare - the government's role

Sarah Neal

So in terms of racialised exclusions and discriminations we see continuities if we look at labour and employment. Of course New Labour has put an emphasis on social exclusion and the way to tackle social exclusion as being work, and I wonder if both of you, or either of you would like to comment on the extent to which being in work can bring about social inclusion.

Rob Sykes

Well I think one of the ways in which clearly it's intended by the current government to foster this inclusion is very much through the labour market, the idea that whoever it is in the family that the way of treating problems of social exclusion is to get a job, so whether it be for, example, a young woman who's a lone parent, she is increasingly to get into work in order to resolve the problems of welfare rather than to receive benefits from the state. This is not to suggest that the current government entirely eschews the idea that the state should provide any sort of support, but it is as we heard in that speech from Tony Blair much more the notion of enabling the state. The state do some things but it's down to you, it's finally your responsibility in order to have these rights to a modicum of welfare support, the policies for inclusion are essentially getting into the labour market, which is of course a problem because there may not actually be the jobs in the local area, or if there are they may not be very good jobs, or they may be jobs which are insecure, as we were saying a moment ago.

Heidi Safia Mirza

Or very low paid.

Rob Sykes

Or very low paid.

Sarah Neal

In talking about work you both mentioned one of the key changes as being the entry of women into the labour market, and one of the areas that we look at in Block 3 is of course the family. And Rob if I could turn back to you, what has been the effect of family organisation of women moving into the labour market to the extent that they now have?

Rob Sykes

This is, I ought to say straight away, an area which has attracted considerable research interest both in the UK and more generally within the European Union. I think to some extent the jury's out on this because although some suggestions were made that this would be bound, would it not, to affect the roles of men and women in family relationships in terms of their gender roles – who was engaged in getting the money from outside paid employment, and who was engaged in the home in looking after the children, and other forms of domestic labour. Well, as many women, I'm sure would say straight away as they would expect, it hasn't happened like that. The great majority of men involved in relationships, family relationships, where they are either unemployed or partially employed, which is often the case, whereas the woman in the relationship is either part-time employed or full-time employed, simply do not carry out any forms, or very few forms of domestic labour at all, such as cleaning, etcetera, etcetera, it falls to the woman, so in some senses the answer is well, not very much change at all. The big change has been that women are in the labour market much more, whether they have children or not, but in terms of their other activities, what is I've referred to, domestic labour, is a real pattern of continuity. One could imagine the pressures that this brings for everybody within the family situation but in particular, of course, for the women.

Sarah Neal

So some continuity there, Heidi. What are the other areas of change that we've seen in terms of family lives and family formations?

Heidi Safia Mirza

I think what Rob was saying about continuity is really interesting. There is this myth, I would call it for want of a better word, that somehow things have got better for women. We see a lot of change in family forms, and the idea that it's better is very much established, and some say well feminism has had a part to play in that, and I would argue yes, that had a role to play over the last forty years, all these social movements to secure more rights for women, but at the same time it's largely the economics that have driven the changes, the fact that women are very cheap to employ, they are often, still see themselves ideologically as very much tied to the home, they're the main carers, they are the ones who take the kids to school, they are the ones who often are engaged in part-time jobs, sometimes two jobs or three jobs and so, as Rob was talking about in Sheffield, you find women in shops, in catering, in areas which their labour can be retracted and expanded, so this idea that we've lost the traditional family, yes in some ways we don't have the kind of monolithic traditional family, but we still have family forms and the family quite interestingly is still very popular. People want to get married, I don't know if they just like buying the white dresses, or having big parties, but they seem to still like getting married. This idea that you have more choice is often thought of as, well it's democratisation, more autonomy, sometimes it's referred to as modern individualism within the family where people have their own roles so that the husband might have his own friends, and the wife has her own interests, and they go about their own businesses. There's an increase in lone parenting, far more for women than for men, and we find that amongst some ethnic minority groups, for example African-Caribbean women, about fifty percent are lone parents, one in ten white women are lone parents, and it's increasing all the time, and you find it particularly increasing in areas of high unemployment, particularly in the regions like Sheffield. But on the whole I would argue that the family is a source of continuity and what we do in society now isn't a breakdown of the family but a diversity of family forms. For example, Asian families are still very much (quote, unquote) "intact", meaning that marriage is very popular, it's seen as a way of cultural transmission, and something that people get a lot of pleasure from in terms of having events and social cohesion, but at the same time we do find an awful lot of stress and violence and abuse, not only within Asian families, but within a lot of the family structures, and we find in Britain we do appallingly in terms of childcare and infrastructure to support these diverse family forms, so that you have women going into the labour market, but very little support for them. So yes, I still think we have the monolithic institution of marriage and sexual division of labour still very much intact.

Rob Sykes

Could I just add in there that the bit that strikes me, I mean one of the things that's occurred in the UK is the way in which, although there are continuities, nevertheless there's now an increasingly diverse range of family forms, and yet it seems the state and, for that matter to some extent, the market hasn't caught up with this in terms of welfare. Welfare systems don't seem to have managed to make that shift.

Heidi Safia Mirza

Yes we still get benefits according to if you're married or not, and we're assessed through our tax system if we're married or not, we don't recognise same sex couples, and we still have a very traditional state mentality with regard to family structure even though they're changing on the ground. You're right Rob, we haven't kept up.