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ARTICLE

Carefully capacitating? Agentic capacity and coercion in the activation of lone mothers in Ireland

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Abstract
This article assesses whether recent Irish activation reforms for lone parents' function as capacitating elements of a social investment (SI) strategy. Although activation is presented as evidence of Ireland's shift towards SI, our analysis questions this claim using the concept of agentic capacity – the structured conditions enabling individuals to balance care, employment, and education. Drawing on two small-scale studies, we centre lived experiences of activation requirements and income supports and find that while access to education and training can strengthen autonomy and future planning, these benefits are constrained by conditionality, administrative burdens, childcare shortages, and age-based thresholds. The reforms thus represent a model in which coercive activation logics persist within SI rhetoric. By advancing agentic capacity as an evaluative criterion, the article contributes to debates on activation and SI, highlighting how institutional design, childcare provision, temporal alignment, and conditionality shape meaningful choice for lone parents.

Keywords: social investment; lone mothers; Ireland; childcare; education

Introduction

Activation policy for lone parents has been identified as one of the main ways in which the Irish welfare state has begun to embrace a social investment (SI) orientation (O'Donnell and Thomas, 2017). We examine this claim through the lived experiences of lone mothers, presenting an Irish case study of the capacitating active labour market policy (ALMP) dimension of SI. The SI paradigm is typically understood as a move away from both the passive welfare states of the post-war period and from the more punitive welfare states that emerged in the liberal world of welfare in the 1980s. It favours an approach that seeks to develop human capital for a strong economy, recognise and foster potential to build strong communities and societies, and emphasise both rights and responsibilities as a way of promoting economic, social, and individual well-being. SI's focus on human capital means that ALMPs are an important element of its overall approach (Hemerijck, 2018). The focus of this article is on the activation element of ALMPs. Interpretations of ALMP and activation, and their relationship, vary (Clasen and Mascaró, 2022). We consider ALMP to designate the range of policies and services that focus on training, upskilling, employing, or incentivising those who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment and which have been in place across welfare states since at least the 1950s. Activation is taken to designate a more recent iteration since at least the 1990s which merges ALMPs with social protection for working age adults with the intention of "activating" recipients for their re-insertion into the labour market. Following this, activation policies may be considered a particular iteration of ALMPs which sit

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within the SI paradigm in at least two ways. This is when ALMPs are considered capacitating policies that contribute both to the "flow" of labour market and life course transitions, and to the "stock" of capabilities and human capital (Hemerijck, 2017). However, these functions of ALMPs are in tension with the iteration of ALMPs as activation which have more of a "work first" lineage using coercive and conditional over capacitating policy instruments (Hemerijck, 2017). Despite SI being attuned to the gendered nature of life course transitions, an additional tension in the context of lone parents is the degree to which a focus on human capital and labour market participation fully reflects their needs and choices, given their different experiences of time to work and time to care, compared to coupled parents. In this respect, SI tends to devalue care in its own right because of its emphasis on labour market participation and productivity. We examine these tensions in the context of recent Irish activation policy reforms as they pertain to lone mothers, looking at how their design mixes coercive conditionality with limited capacitating supports thus compromising their SI potential.

Specifically in the Irish case, we argue that the policy should be understood primarily as an activation measure that contains some SI elements (training, education supports), but that the balance between coercion and capacitation is central to whether lone mothers can exercise agency over care, work, and education. To analyse this, we develop the concept of "agentic capacity" to assess the extent to which activation policy enables lone mothers to make choices about care, paid work, and education that suit their families and future well-being. The article asks to what degree activation policies enable lone mothers to balance care, work, and education. Using a qualitative approach, the research focuses on agentic capacity rooted in lived experience. This is a lens frequently missing in more quantitatively oriented studies of lone parents and social policy and whose inclusion is important in understanding what makes for effective policies for lone parents (Lindsay et al., 2022).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. It begins with a literature review which incorporates three strands. First, drawing on complementary European-wide and Irish literature, it outlines why lone mothers are a significant policy cohort with respect to activation as a capacitating element of SI. Second, it unpacks the tensions between SI and labour market activation from a gendered care perspective. Third, it discusses the notion of agentic capacity to more fully account for ways in which SI could be more carefully capacitating across the full range and balance of activities that matter to lone mothers at their particular life stage. The article then sketches the Irish policy context outlining the lone parent activation reforms that have unfolded over the last decade. The methods section details the studies from which we derive our qualitative data and how it is analysed. This is followed by presentation and analysis of our research findings which steps through the following themes: childcare as foundational infrastructure of agentic capacity; the capacity to care as legitimate work; conditionality, administrative friction, and the erosion of self-investment; temporal conditionality and the cliff-edge of activation; meaningful choice, flexible futures, and the conditions of genuine social investment. A final discussion and concluding section essentially suggests that contrary to albeit cautious interpretation of Irish reforms as "indicative of a social investment activation-oriented approach" (O'Donnell and Thomas, 2017, 251), these reforms are limited and marked by "missing pieces." What our findings imply for more "carefully capacitating" forms of SI completes the article.

Lone mothers, social investment, activation, agentic capacity, and gendered care

Lone parents are particularly important cohort to consider with respect to activation as a capacitating element of SI for several salient reasons. In the first instance, lone parents, the majority of whom are mothers, represent a policy "blind spot" at both Irish and European-wide scales, whereby policy developments are often "blind" to their impact on lone parents (Nieuwenhuis, 2020, 2021). Lone parents are perennially over-represented in poverty statistics and policy responses, including activation, have not adequately addressed their high risk of poverty (Nieuwenhuis, 2020; Tartari, 2022). This is compounded by other negative outcomes including poor employment and health outcomes (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018; Nieuwenhuis, 2020). In addition, lone parent headed families are a significant cohort

in the EU, comprising 12.7% of households with dependent children in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025). Lone parent headed families are projected to continue to increase to 2030 (Tartari, 2022). In the Irish case, the percentage of lone parent households is above the EU average at 15.7% in 2023. Ireland also posts one of the highest risk of poverty rates for lone parents in the EU at 24.2% in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025) while also having high rates of in-work poverty for lone parents (Roantree et al., 2022).

Research in the Irish context mirrors the wider European picture (Fahey et al., 2012; Russell and Maître, 2024). Lone parents are at much higher risk of economic vulnerability (measured as a combination of low household income, deprivation, and subjective financial distress) than two parent families, with lower education levels, lack of employment, and disability all being associated with their higher economic vulnerability (Russell and Maître, 2024). Such findings also have implications for children in lone parent families. Fahey et al. (2012) find, for example, that parental resources, as indicated by their level of education and their ability to avoid poverty matter for child well-being. This is further supported by Hannan and Halpin (2014), whose quantitative analysis shows that socio-economic background and family structure are strongly associated with children's outcomes in Ireland, reinforcing the role of structural inequalities in shaping the circumstances of lone parent families. Moreover, the activation-oriented reforms which are the subject of this article were critiqued as "careless activation" at their inception (Murphy, 2012) and for "putting the cart before the horses" (Millar and Crosse, 2018). These critiques referred to the fact that the reforms lacked an ethic of care for not acknowledging the reality of care in women's lives, and for obligating labour market participation before resourcing lone parents with adequate childcare, education, and training. More recent commentaries have also questioned the capacity of Ireland's activation system to address poverty against the prevalence of low-paid work (Daly, 2021), which is a particularly salient question in respect of lone parent's high risk of in-work poverty. These trends and critical research, both across the EU and specifically in Ireland, suggest that activation as a policy strategy and in particular "capacitating active labour market policies" as an element of SI (Wagner et al., 2025) needs to do more to capture this group.

A crucial aspect of ALMPs from a SI perspective is that they are capacitating, that they facilitate the flow of people into the labour market, and that they actually invest in human capital, thus improving the stock of the labour force. This SI notion of capacitating ALMPs also highlights the gendered nature of labour market transitions and aims to be particularly attuned to how women's full participation in the labour market can be enabled, including lone and young parents (Hemerijck, 2017). However, this orientation encounters tensions in at least two ways. The first is that activation and ALMPs are ambiguous entities (Bonoli, 2011) and it can be difficult to discern the degree to which they embody a SI orientation, which is itself also host to ambiguity (Jenson, 2011). The second is a tension between the emphasis on labour market participation and care as a valuable activity and, indeed, form of work in its own right (Klein, 2021; Offredi, 2026). Both tensions are of relevance to the life situations of lone mothers. As mentioned, they are particularly vulnerable to forms of activation that compel rather than capacitate them towards labour market participation because of their high risk of poverty, including in-work poverty (Murphy, 2012; Millar and Crosse, 2018; Nieuwenhuis, 2020; Tartari, 2022; Russell and Maître, 2024). Moreover, because they are parenting alone, they do not have the typical care resources of two-parent families. Therefore, having the capacity to care, and to make choices between work, care, and other activities such as training and education, in ways that holistically suit their life situation, rather than solely their labour market situation, matter. These tensions are unpacked further in the following paragraphs before we turn to an explication of agentic capacity as a way of understanding the experience of these tensions, to complete the literature review.

There is a degree of ambiguity around what ALMPs entail as a social policy category and what their relationship with activation is (Bonoli, 2011; Clasen and Mascarò, 2022). There is also an extensive literature on how ALMPs can be classified according to how demanding or enabling they are (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004; Eichhorst et al., 2008). Their periodisation, in turn, tends to distinguish activation type ALMPs from earlier offerings, with the former being characterised by a greater focus on conditionalities and greater emphasis on labour market participation through workfare or work-first principles (Andersen and Larsen, 2024). SI proponents also distinguish SI from more conditional types

of ALMPs designated as activation however, SI too is an ambiguous paradigm which can amplify the ambiguities in how ALMPS are understood, designed, and delivered. Jenson (2011, 78), for example, notes that SI can be "profoundly ambiguous." For her this is a strength of the perspective because it means that "terms such as 'active labour market policy' can be retrieved from the years of the *trente glorieuses*, washed of their neoliberal connotations and recycled for a SI future" (ibid.). While the retrieval of ALMP emphasises investment and capacity building, the question of the degree to which individuals have a duty to take up active labour market offerings is less clear. Drawing on Jenson (2011) again, for example, on the question of women's choice of participation in the labour market, both neoliberalism and SI are cast as permitting choice "only for those women who can afford it" (Jenson, 2011, 72). This is a crucial issue for lone mother participation in the labour market and from the perspective of this article is one which requires understanding of how activation policies are experienced and whether that experience promotes agentic capacity or otherwise.

Engaging with this issue also requires a focus on the gendered nature of care as central to how lone mothers experience activation and SI policies, and their ambiguities. Saraceno (2015) suggests that as social policies promote the entry of more women to the work force, new tensions emerge and the boundaries between states and families are re-drawn in a way that potentially obfuscates or perhaps even reinforces gender-based inequalities both within households and in the labour market. Saraceno (2015, 257–258) also suggests that the SI approach potentially ignores the relational meaning of care within households noting that:

> [SI] supports a partial defamilization of women and children, through work-family conciliating policies, early childcare and education. But it also accepts that women will retain the main responsibility for unpaid family work. In this and other ways, it also implicitly devalues all unpaid activities that are not easily included in a human capital enriching approach.

This suggests that SI strategies and how they promote labour market participation must be calibrated and nuanced with the gendered nature of care in mind and this, we argue, becomes even more pronounced in the case of single parent households. In their case, there is no second carer or earner in the household to balance working and care or to navigate what Millar and Ridge (2020) call the "family-work project" of single parents.

In addition, with respect to social inclusion through work, as Cantillon and Van Lancker (2013) point out, not everyone will be able to enter the workforce and especially not full time, and this may be due to disability or to caring responsibilities. The latter applies in particular to lone mothers who are more likely to have precarious or unstable work situations, who are less likely to work full time (Moreno Mínguez and Pérez-Corral, 2022) and who face dilemmas between working enough time to avoid poverty or spending time with their children (Ruggeri and Bird, 2014). Lone mothers' value and gender rationalities matter here too, including ways in which some mothers parenting alone may see caring as their actual job, or at least balanced with paid work (Murphy, 2012, 2020; Offredi, 2026). Such perceptions of caring, as Lindsay et al. (2022, 859) suggest, "need to be respected and factored in to support that empowers them to make choices that benefit themselves and their families." SI for such parents would need to take account of how policy programmes for this group are "carefully" calibrated allowing for agentic capacity to avoid becoming punitive welfare or at best, SI with missing pieces.

To unpack these tensions and drawing on contributions which suggest that positive outcomes in the context of SI are partly tied to the degree to which individuals experience meaningful agency (Cantillon and Van Lancker, 2013), we propose the concept of "agentic capacity" as a policy-oriented specification of agency within SI debates. We use this concept to refer to the capacity for persons to make choices that allow for the balance of care, labour market participation, and educational attainment in a way that is not unduly constrained by policy criteria. The concept of agency has, of course, a long-standing presence in sociology and social policy analysis, including work on children and families which emphasises relational and structurally embedded forms of agency (e.g. Cantillon and Van Lancker, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2022). We do not claim conceptual novelty in the abstract sense. Rather, our contribution lies in specifying how

agency is mediated through the design and calibration of activation policy. By "agentic capacity," we refer to the degree to which institutional arrangements enable or constrain the practical realisation of agency in everyday life. In this sense, agentic capacity foregrounds the interaction between individual decision making and policy architecture, directing attention to how conditionality, time limits, childcare provision, and administrative practices shape the scope for meaningful choice. While agency refers broadly to the ability of individuals to act, agentic capacity directs analytical attention to the structured conditions under which that action becomes feasible, sustainable, and low risk. It therefore explicitly integrates structure into the analysis rather than separating the two. In doing so, it aligns with critiques of SI that highlight how meaningful choice requires material and institutional supports (Cantillon and Van Lancker, 2013; Saraceno, 2015). This framing allows us to refine the idea of "capacitating" activation (Wagner et al., 2025). A carefully capacitating approach would not merely encourage labour market participation but would design activation in ways that enhance agentic capacity across care, work, and education domains. The distinction matters because the ambiguous nature of activation can formally promote agency, while substantively narrowing the conditions under which it can be exercised.

The Irish policy context: SI, activation, and lone parents

Efforts to activate lone parents in Ireland began in the mid-2000s. At that point, the Irish welfare state was still benefiting from the growth effects of the "Celtic Tiger" economy, however, high levels of poverty among lone parent families and their high reliance on social welfare were growing policy concerns (OECD, 2003; Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006). Ireland remained an outlier in contrast to other welfare states, where age-based work-related conditionalities and shifts in thinking about single parents as primarily breadwinners rather than carers had already taken place (Finn and Gloster, 2010). Ireland's income support payment for lone parents, the One-Parent Family Payment (OFP), remained intact and available to lone parents until their youngest child reached 18 years of age or 22 if in full-time education. It did not come with activation conditionalities and had more generous earnings disregards compared to jobseeker's allowance (JA) which were underscored by Ireland's lack of childcare provision (Grubb et al., 2009). Despite reform plans mooted in 2006 which were justified by the discourse that "one of the best routes out of poverty for lone parents is through paid employment" (Brennan in Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006, 8), changes were not made until the 2008 financial crisis generated a long period of austerity. Activation policy was significantly transformed with lone parents being a key target group. However, an initial plan to restrict OFP to single parents with children under 7 years of age was softened somewhat by the introduction of an alternative payment called jobseeker's transitional allowance (JST). JST was gradually introduced between 2013 and 2015 and requires lone parents whose youngest child is aged between 7 and 14 to engage in activation through upskilling and preparation for entering the workforce but not to be available for full-time work. Once a lone parent's youngest child reaches 14, lone parents are treated like other adults of working age subject to the full work-related conditionalities of JA. Jobseeker conditionalities also increased as part of the crisis-related reforms. Activation and income supports were integrated under one system and new sanctions for non-compliance, including payment cuts and suspensions, were introduced in 2010 and 2013 (Dukelow, 2018).[1]

The more moderated policy change for lone parents was the result of a significant campaign of resistance by lone parent groups who argued that "7 is too young," referring to the negative effects the original reforms would have on lone parent families, ignoring their lived realities (Dukelow et al., 2023). However, the principle that "paid work is the best way out of poverty and social exclusion" (Burton, 2013) was reiterated in political discourse, with JST framed in SI language as ensuring "that lone-parents are helped in a compassionate, supportive and effective way to return to work in a manner that best suits

[1]Other aspects of activation reforms also impacted on lone parents. Training and education services and related payments were also cut back. See Dukelow (2018) for further detail.

their family circumstances" (Burton, 2013). As of 2025, this payment support system remains the same, with the main change being a slight improvement to earnings disregards for recipients of OFP and JST following significant cutbacks in the mid-2010s.

These reforms did not come with any initial improvement to childcare nor to the education and training components of activation, which were tightened in some respects (Dukelow, 2018). Improvements, most specifically in childcare, came later. In 2017, a single affordable childcare scheme with both a universal component and a means-tested top-up was introduced and called the National Childcare Scheme since 2019. Coinciding with economic recovery and a return to high economic growth levels, this change perhaps more fully reflects what Daly (2019: 287) calls Ireland's "social investment moment" designed to increase labour market participation and address lone parent family poverty. It is estimated to have reduced the costs of childcare for lone parents by almost 30% (OECD 2022 in Curristan et al., 2023). However, despite the new scheme, access, affordability, and appropriateness were still issues for parents (Daly, 2019; McGauran, 2021; Russell and Maître, 2024) and this is borne out in the empirical materials presented further on.

To date, the main thrust of research evaluating these changes has been quantitative and largely survey based and it provides a mixed picture. Lone parents do appear to be financially better off through greater levels of engagement in formal labour (Indecon, 2017; Redmond et al. 2023). However, Redmond et al. (2023) caution that it is important to interpret these findings in the context of a strongly performing economy. It is also the case that lone parents remain at disproportionate risk of in-work poverty (Roantree et al., 2022); are more likely to be in low-paid work compared to others with similar qualifications (Hingre et al., 2024); and are one of the groups most likely not to have a minimum income which meets their essential expenditure needs (Maître and Alamir, 2024). In the round, this research points to the fact that employment alone does not lift lone parents out of poverty and an investment approach that combines work, income support, and services is important (Russell and Maître, 2024). There are complex forces at play between how lone parents navigate and balance supports, services, and work in ways that best suit their circumstances and well-being against these policy changes which is the cue for our focus on agentic capacity and which the findings presented next illuminate.

Methodology

The findings draw on qualitative datasets from two rounds of research with lone parents, both of which are relatively small scale.[2] The qualitative data gathered in both studies offer insights into experiences of activation and their SI orientation. The focus on a qualitative approach offers a counterpoint to the predominantly quantitative and survey-based approaches taken to researching these policy reforms to date and, as mentioned earlier, it provides a lived reality perspective on what constitutes effective policies from a lone parent perspective (Lindsay et al., 2022). The fact that the lone mothers included in both studies shared similar characteristics presented an opportunity to synthesise the data and build a broader picture than could be derived from one small data set alone. All participants across both data sets had experience of parenting a child or children under 18 years of age, had experience of claiming a social protection payment as a lone parent, and had experience of an activation element of the system, either as a JST recipient and/or as a student in higher education (HE) while receiving a social welfare payment as a lone parent. The first study involved a sample of 13 lone parents who had experience of claiming JST, 3 of whom were involved in a focus group and 10 of whom were interviewed. Of the 13 participants, one was a lone father who we have removed from the sample used in this article. Data in this study were gathered in 2022. The second study focused on lone parents in HE, with a substantial sub-set also claiming social welfare. The research involved several stages (a questionnaire, interviews, and audio diaries). For the purposes of this article, data are drawn from the qualitative interview stage which involved a sample of

[2]For full details of both studies see Dukelow et al. (2023, 2025). Both were funded by Research Ireland, grant numbers R20744 and R21975.

12 participants all of whom were women, with experience of claiming either OFP or JST and engaging in HE. Data for the second study were collected in 2024. Ethical approval for both pieces of research was granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee at University College, Cork and followed ethical standards such as informed consent and anonymity. The focus group lasted 1.5 hours and each interview, which was semi-structured, lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. All data were transcribed, any details that would identify a participant were removed and each participant was given a pseudonym. Recruitment procedures varied between the studies, with the first study recruiting participants predominantly through lone parent organisations and related civil society organisations. The second study recruited participants through HE institutions, principally through the Mature Students Ireland network which comprises mature student officers and others supporting mature students across Ireland's HE institutions.

Both authors analysed the data by first engaging separately in a preliminary review of the interview transcripts assigning codes focused on participant experiences of care, work, and education plus anything else of note emerging from participants' experiences. Following the preliminary assigning of codes, a joint set of codes were agreed upon which extended from experiences of care, work, and education, to experiences of claiming social welfare and interactions with social welfare officers, which also emerged as significant elements of participant experience in the data. The interview transcripts were analysed a second time by both authors for how these codes spoke to themes of policy-related choice and constraint as a way of interpreting experience through the lens of agentic capacity with a final joint review to select and finalise the themes as presented here. No qualitative data analysis software was used in this study. Given the relatively small sample size, coding was conducted manually by both authors to facilitate close engagement with the data. While this approach enabled detailed interpretation, it may increase the risk of subjectivity compared to software-assisted analysis. To mitigate this, both authors independently coded the data and engaged in iterative comparison and agreement of codes and themes.

Findings: agentic capacity and lone parent experiences of Irish policy changes

In what follows, we step through each of the themes selected, keeping our key question in mind: To what degree activation policies targeted at lone mothers enable their agentic capacity with regard to how they choose and balance care, work, and education.

Childcare as foundational infrastructure of agentic capacity

This first theme highlights childcare not as a peripheral support but as the material foundation upon which agentic capacity rests. Participants' accounts show that without accessible, affordable, and appropriately timed childcare, education and employment choices remain largely aspirational. While this article focuses primarily on formal childcare provision as a key enabling condition, the Irish literature consistently highlights the importance of informal family support, particularly from extended family such as grandparents, in sustaining lone parents' care arrangements. Doorley et al. (2021) and Russell et al. (2025) demonstrate that access to such support significantly shapes labour market participation and engagement in education and training in Ireland. Although this did not emerge as a distinct standalone theme in our interviews, it is implicit in participants' accounts of constrained choice and limited flexibility and should be understood as an important contextual factor shaping agentic capacity. In this respect, childcare and its affordability functions as the enabling (or disabling) infrastructure of social investment, determining whether lone mothers can practically translate policy rhetoric into lived autonomy. Making choices for the research participants often meant grappling with or attempting to strike a balance between childcare, work, education, and other responsibilities. This evokes key considerations in the context of capacitating policy paradigms and what kinds of supports matter to lone mothers. Across both studies, this was often prominently linked to childcare generally and to the affordability of childcare:

> It is so, so expensive – just too expensive. I think most people who want to go back to school - when they think of the child care and especially where to leave their children - that is the reason why they would say "no, you know what, I don't care – I stay at home." (Olivia, 40s, 5 children)

Olivia, who took part in our second study, speaks to this in stark terms. Childcare is just "too expensive" and this potentially leads people to opt not to return to education. This effectively cuts people off from a key avenue for self and SI in the form of educational attainment and upskilling. Fundamentally, Olivia's observation speaks to the fact that the promotion of education as a social good through capacitating social policy strategies must be coupled with matched investment in affordable childcare to be effective as a form of SI. A lack of affordable childcare as a barrier to making choices also featured in the context of work:

> …and child care then. You have to cut down on your spend on childcare so I used to try to work extra hours on a Monday and Tuesday and leave my daughter longer in school and then you are to the board then – you know that kind of way. (Aileen, 40s, 1 child)

Couched in the reality of financial constraint, Aileen, who took part in our first study, describes trying to balance affording childcare, working extra hours, and caring for her daughter. This again speaks to constraints which produce a lack of choice and so thereby illustrates constraint on agentic capacity and both Aileen and Olivia's experiences will have been replicated across both participant groups. In what both Aileen and Olivia describe; they have attempted to make choices around work and education to benefit themselves, their families, and ultimately their communities and societies, but each has found it difficult to give practical expression to these choices as they are constrained in their capacity to make them work.

The capacity to care as legitimate work

This theme foregrounds lone mothers' insistence that caregiving is itself intensive, skilled, and socially valuable labour. Participants contest activation logics that implicitly privilege paid employment while marginalising unpaid care, particularly during adolescence. Their accounts reveal that agentic capacity depends not only on access to paid work but also on institutional recognition of care as a legitimate domain of investment rather than a residual obstacle to labour market participation and this speaks directly to the intersecting and overlapping logics of activation and SI and the importance participants placed on their work as parents which echoes the points raised in the literature about family care as (unpaid) work and how its importance is undervalued. In the following excerpt, for example, Aileen questions the expectation that lone parents are required to work full time:

> I do work – I parent full time plus I work outside the home and I think that is a huge difference. Job Seekers' – I don't have time to look for a job. I am parenting. I don't have the second parent to help or support financially or emotionally or anything for a child; so where do they expect me to get time to actually look for a job? (Aileen, 40s, 1 child)

Here Aileen is not rejecting the importance of working "outside the home," but she juxtaposes this with the fact that she "works" as a full-time parent, something which policy approaches that prioritise labour market participation are often silent about and do not factor as part of the gendered rationale of lone parents in balancing paid work and care. This is important not only from the perspective of time constraints, but also about the lived reality of parenting as a lone parent, the different needs of children, and their well-being as Lillian articulates:

> There is a lot of parenting that has to go on between 14 and 17. It is in some ways the most extreme parenting you are ever going to do because you are keeping your eyes on the back of their heads more so when they are four to seven. Like at four to seven, you know they are not going to be selling

> drugs or buying cigarettes or doing alcohol. You can ask a neighbour to mind them for a couple of hours – you can't off sell your parenting of a 14-year-old – you have to actively parent a 14-year-old. To expect people to work full time when their child could not be able to manage that on their own – there are not even crèches available for 14 or after school care or anything – there is nothing suitable for them…. They are decisions that, you know… Leave parenting and children – let parents know what is best for their children…let us make the decisions that suit our children and our families. (Lillian, 50s, 2 children)

Conditionality, administrative friction, and the erosion of self-investment

This theme examines how compliance-oriented activation practices constrain the forms of self-investment they are intended to promote. Even when lone mothers pursue HE or employment in line with SI principles, administrative rigidity, generic communications, and sanction anxiety undermine stability and well-being. Here, agentic capacity is narrowed not by outright exclusion but by the cumulative pressures of conditionality and bureaucratic misalignment. In this respect, whether because of care responsibilities intersecting with work and/or education or because of the financial limits that come with receiving state assistance as a primary strand of income, constraints around attempting to realise and actualise one's choices was writ large across both data sets. For example, in our first study, Clodagh calls attention to trying to make employment work while being a lone parent with significant caring responsibilities:

> …in order for me to go to work – I had tried a couple of places for jobs – couldn't find anything that would cover school hours - and the youngest was out at half past one at the time. It was a lot of anxiety around the whole situation to be honest. When you can only work a few hours, you can't pay childcare then after that. (Clodagh, 40s, 2 children)

Building on this, and in our first study in particular, many of our respondents indicated that once they had made a choice to work or to invest in themselves through education, the very things that JST encouraged recipients to do, the "system" itself asserted itself as a particular agent of constraint, placing unreasonable expectations on recipients in ways that made giving practical expression to their choices difficult and thus shifting from SI in language to coercive activation in practice. For example, Clodagh gives a sense of the difficulties she faced while trying to complete a law degree and still comply with the conditions of her payment:

> …I said to them "I am in university at the moment. I am studying law." Trying to get in here between lectures - because you could be in there for an hour or two queuing – and now they have actually given me the ability that next time – they said the letters are sent out automatically with a date that you have to present yourself in the office… (Clodagh, 40s, 2 children)

Clodagh was ultimately able to resolve this issue, but her experiences nevertheless speak to the need for policy strategies and the payment schemes to which they give rise to be carefully calibrated so that when people make choices to invest in themselves through things like tertiary education, these choices are recognised and supported. This in turn denotes a key further way in which the "system" appeared to stymie the self-investments our research participants choose for themselves through a continuous failure to recognise and account for this. Many had taken decisions to invest in themselves through education, but nevertheless continued to receive correspondence and suggestions from the Department of Social Protection which took no account of individual contexts or existing skills. These types of departmental contacts were not merely inconvenient, procedural, or annoying, but would often provoke anxiety and stress:

> I started to receive emails from the Department of Social Protection about training and employment opportunities – there was a number of them – and even though I am in full time education and

> so I am, I would say, co-operating indirectly with the Department of Social Protection because I know that if I was not co-operating – meaning if I wasn't attending these meetings or responding to these emails with respect to the training to do something about my employment perhaps things would be different. But still receiving these emails – it doesn't really make me comfortable because there is still something in the back of my mind. (Darcy, 30s, 2 children)

In this excerpt from Darcy, who took part in our first study, a complex scenario plays out. Darcy feels that through being in full-time education, she is investing in herself and is thereby complying with the terms of her payment. Yet, this is not enough and despite engaging in full-time education, Darcy remains uncomfortable and thus feels obligated to respond to emails and attend meetings when necessary. From Clodagh's example, we know that meeting generic departmental requirements can interfere with choices made for self-investment. If the type of self-investment that both Clodagh and Darcy are engaged in ultimately represents a form of SI, then this type of departmental interference is problematic and veers away from SI and towards punitive, conditional welfare. As with experiences of making choices that meant grappling with intersecting demands such as childcare, education, and employment, being stymied by a poorly calibrated policy offering, a type of SI with missing pieces or blind spots, was something that participants across both studies experienced generally.

Temporal conditionality and the cliff-edge of activation

This theme explores how age-based thresholds, particularly the transition from JST to JA generate anticipatory insecurity and compress long-term planning. The arbitrary temporal design of activation policy creates a "cliff-edge" that shapes decision making well before it is reached. Agentic capacity is thus temporally structured, expanding during periods of supported investment and contracting as compulsory full-time availability looms. This denotes a further way in which the SI motif that ostensibly characterises the policies shaping our respondents' experiences impacts on agentic capacity comes via the time-limited and strictly mandated nature of what is on offer. For our respondents who were JST recipients at the time of interview, this payment will end when their youngest child turns 14. After this point, recipients who have not fully transitioned into full-time employment and who are not in full-time education are expected to transition to a traditional JA payment with all the job-seeking requirements and other conditions this entails. This shift out of JST which is at least partly characterised by a logic of SI and into JA which is a traditional social assistance payment with commensurate expectations and limits, creates a SI cliff edge and clearly has ramifications for the agentic capacity of the lone parents who took part in our studies and by virtue of this, for their well-being:

> My youngest is 11 so in three years' time I am going to lose that payment and then what? I am going to have to go back to fulltime work but like I still have two kids and… I have a 14-year-old now. I know what it is like to have a 14-year-old. I would prefer if there was something that went a little bit further than 14. (Claire, 40s, 2 children)

Claire, who took part in our first study, spoke about the challenges she is likely to face as her youngest child turns 14, noting that a 14-year-old remains a child and stating her preference for support beyond what appears to relatively arbitrary cut-off point. Next, Darcy describes similar challenges:

> When your child turns 14, you can leave the child at home for a couple of hours on his own or her own – that is fine – but if you have no opportunity to advance yourself before that - which is the crucial period - it is then when your child turns 14 – yes you may exceed your hours of your paid employment but, being exposed to insecure employment… (Darcy, 30s, 2 children)

Meaningful choice, flexible futures, and the conditions of genuine social investment

This final theme captures participants' reflections on what becomes possible when activation genuinely aligns with their life-course realities. Where time, flexibility, and financial support are present, lone mothers describe expanded horizons, autonomy, and sustainable work–care balance. This theme thereby underscores the article's central argument: that SI only becomes truly capacitating when institutional design enables meaningful, low-risk choice across care, work, and education domains. In previous excerpts, Claire and Darcy are clearly concerned that the transition towards a payment with places a stronger emphasis on job seeking and less emphasis on self-investment will limit their ability to make preferred choices, and may even force them to take up low-paid or insecure work at the expense of self-advancement. Cutting off opportunities for self-investment like this based on arbitrary age limits for the youngest child potentially undoes the good work that a period of SI can initiate, and this is evidenced across both data sets wherein our respondents spoke about what having choice and agency allowed them to do and what having it removed could potentially prevent. For example, Catherine, who took part in our second study, spoke about what going back to education and studying to be a therapist has allowed her to do:

> It has opened up a whole new world of possibilities I guess – that I can actually be at home with the children part time and do my thing. I can make up my own schedule – there are so many options of things that I can do – groups and private practice – just the flexibility I suppose and the creative bit which have been really key parts of my life. (Catherine, 30s, 2 children)

Likewise, Clodagh spoke about what receiving a supporting and enabling payment that has less conditions and is couched in SI has meant to her:

> It gives me more time at the moment that I can actually go to study. It gives me that option that I am not forced into the workplace straight away and, with raising two boys on my own, you are limiting yourself and your life and your future potential for both you and your children when you know that you can do better than that. (Clodagh, 40s, 2 children)

Both Catherine and Clodagh's descriptions strongly resonate with respondent experiences across the two groups. What this suggests then is that SI can and does work when it allows people the opportunities to make choices that best suit their lives *when* it best suits them to do so. Cutting persons off from opportunities for the types of self-investment that form the building blocks of SI at an arbitrary point in time therefore represents a decidedly misguided approach or false economy which speaks to "some" SI as opposed to full SI.

Discussion and conclusion

This article set out to examine the extent to which recent Irish activation reforms directed at lone parents operate as capacitating elements of a SI strategy. Using the concept of *agentic capacity* as an analytical lens, we explored whether these reforms enable lone mothers to balance care, work, and education in ways that align with their circumstances and well-being. Three inter-related insights emerge from the analysis. First, in relation to existing literature, our findings suggest that the lone parent reforms are best understood not as a straightforward SI turn, but as a hybrid configuration in which coercive activation logics remain prominent. While previous analysis has cautiously interpreted the reforms as indicative of a SI orientation (O'Donnell and Thomas, 2017), our qualitative evidence reveals how conditionality, time limits, and administrative practices frequently undermine their capacitating promise in lived experience. Employment participation may increase under such reforms, but this does not necessarily translate into enhanced autonomy, security, or sustainable well-being. Second, conceptually, this article refines debates about capacitating welfare states (Wagner et al., 2025) by specifying *agentic capacity* as a criterion for

evaluating activation policy. Agency is not treated here as an abstract individual trait, nor as something separable from structural constraint. Rather, agentic capacity refers to the structured conditions under which meaningful choice becomes feasible and sustainable. This framing aligns with gendered critiques of SI (Saraceno, 2015) and with arguments that social inclusion through work must be accompanied by adequate supports if it is to be genuinely enabling (Cantillon and Van Lancker, 2013). By foregrounding the interaction between policy design and lived decision making, we show how activation can formally promote choice while substantively narrowing the circumstances under which it can be exercised. Third, empirically in the Irish case, the analysis highlights the importance of temporal design and policy "cliff edges." The age-based transition from JST to JA creates anticipatory insecurity that shapes behaviour well before the transition occurs. This temporal constraint limits the scope for longer term educational or career planning and can encourage short-term, low-paid, or insecure employment decisions. In this respect, the Irish case contributes to wider debates about the tension between SI rhetoric and activation practice, and adds an evidence base to earlier critiques of the reforms (Murphy, 2012; Millar and Crosse, 2018).

SI with missing pieces

Across both data sets, lone mothers demonstrated strong commitment to improving their own and their children's futures through education, employment, and careful parenting. Where opportunities for supported education or flexible work existed, participants described genuine benefits. However, these positive outcomes were often achieved despite institutional design rather than because of it. The most persistent constraints were: limited, costly, or ill-fitting childcare provision; compliance-oriented administrative practices; anxiety associated with conditionality and sanctions; and rigid age-based thresholds governing support. These features illustrate what might be described as *SI with missing pieces*. While the language of investment and support is present, the infrastructure necessary to translate this into durable agentic capacity remains incomplete. Care responsibilities, particularly during adolescence, are insufficiently recognised within activation design. As Saraceno (2015) argues, SI strategies can partially defamiliarise women while simultaneously leaving primary care responsibilities intact. For lone mothers, this tension is especially acute because there is no second adult to absorb risk or redistribute time. The findings therefore reinforce the argument that capacitating activation must be carefully calibrated. Without such calibration, activation risks reproducing the coercive dynamics associated with work-first regimes, even when framed within SI discourse.

Policy and practice implications

A carefully capacitating activation strategy for lone parents would require recalibration in several areas. First, temporal design matters. Extending the JST age threshold or introducing graduated transitions to JA would reduce cliff-edge effects and allow longer term planning. Age 14 does not mark the end of intensive parenting responsibilities, and policy should reflect the realities of adolescent care. Second, childcare provision must be aligned not only with early childhood needs but with school schedules and older children's supervision requirements. Investment in accessible, affordable, and appropriately timed childcare remains foundational to any credible SI strategy. Third, conditionality should be proportionate and flexible. Recognition of education participation and meaningful training as legitimate forms of compliance would better align policy practice with SI principles. Finally, explicit recognition of care work within activation frameworks would mark a substantive shift towards careful capacitation. This does not imply withdrawal from labour market goals, but rather acknowledgement that care, work, and education are inter-dependent domains of investment all of which require sufficient monetary support to address lone parents' risk of poverty and economic vulnerability (Russell and Maître, 2024).

At the level of service delivery, administrative culture and interactional practices are crucial. Automated compliance-driven communications and rigid appointment systems can generate stress

and undermine trust, even where recipients are actively engaged in education or work. Supportive, individualised case management that recognises existing self-investment efforts would more closely reflect the "supportive interaction" and enhanced opportunity central to capacitating welfare state frameworks (Wagner et al., 2025). Reducing unnecessary compliance burdens would strengthen rather than weaken labour market engagement by lowering anxiety and administrative friction (Whelan 2022).

These findings and discussion of policy implications are limited to what can be drawn from a relatively small qualitative sample relating to the Irish context at a specific phase of policy reform. As such, the study is not intended to be statistically generalisable. The sample is shaped by recruitment through civil society organisations and higher education networks, which may bias participation towards more engaged or resourceful lone mothers. In addition, as with all qualitative interview-based research, there is potential for interviewer and interpretive bias. We sought to mitigate these risks through independent coding by both authors, iterative comparison of codes and themes, and consistency checks across the two data sets. Nevertheless, the analysis represents an interpretive account of lived experience rather than a representative account of all lone parents.

In conclusion, a capacitating welfare state cannot be defined solely by the presence of activation measures or by increases in employment rates. Its success depends on whether institutional design expands or narrows the conditions under which meaningful choices can be exercised and which speak to SI in multiple senses. In the Irish case, lone mothers display considerable resilience, ambition, and commitment to self-advancement. Yet, their agentic capacity is frequently realised in spite of policy architecture rather than because of it. Conditionality, limited childcare alignment and rigid temporal thresholds constrain the translation of SI rhetoric into lived autonomy. A carefully capacitating approach would treat care, education, and employment as inter-dependent pillars of SI and calibrate activation accordingly. Such an approach would integrate structural recognition of care, flexible conditionality, and temporal security into activation design. Without this recalibration, SI risks remaining rhetorically compelling but practically partial – particularly for those, like lone mothers, whose lives sit at the intersection of labour market participation and intensive caregiving.

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