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***published in***

Journal of Poverty and Social Justice  
2021

***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1332/175982721X16149598814264](https://doi.org/10.1332/175982721X16149598814264)

***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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***citation for published version (APA)***

Eleveld, A. (2021). Disrespect or dignity? Experiences of mandatory work participants in the Netherlands from the perspective of the right to work. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 29(2), 155-171.  
<https://doi.org/10.1332/175982721X16149598814264>

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# article

## Disrespect or dignity? Experiences of mandatory work participants in the Netherlands from the perspective of the right to work

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This article explores the extent to which mandatory work programmes (MWP) which oblige social assistance recipients to perform work activities in order to improve or develop basic work skills, can be considered in conformity with the human right to work. Drawing on qualitative research in three municipalities in the Netherlands, the findings indicate that overall, the work in the MWPs infringed the right to work. However, part of the MWP participants were able to realise the right to work to the extent that participation in an MWP enhanced their dignity, self-respect and their opportunities for self-development.

**Key words** the right to work • dignity at work • mandatory work programme • welfare-to-work

To cite this article: Eleveld, A. (2021) Disrespect or dignity? Experiences of mandatory work participants in the Netherlands from the perspective of the right to work, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, vol 29, no 2, 155–171, DOI: 10.1332/175982721X16149598814264

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### Introduction

The right to work, places a positive obligation on Member States to maintain high and stable levels of employment and to secure access to decent jobs and decent wages. Active labour market policies (ALMP) are an important means towards realising paid work transitions and as such these programmes have been considered ‘expressive’ of the right to work (Freedland et al, 2007). Documents originating from supervising bodies on the right to work enshrined in, for example, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the European Social Charter (ESC) emphasise, however, that the right to work is not only an instrument for achieving specific goals, such as maintaining high levels of employment; the right to work also implies that the work is grounded in values such as dignity, self-respect and self-realisation (Collins, 2014). This article investigates whether and if so, to what extent, a specific type of ALMP, namely *thin* mandatory work programmes (MWPs) can be considered in conformity with the fundamental right to work.

ALMPs come in different forms. They vary from training programmes to work experience programmes, such as MWPs (Bonoli, 2010; 2013; Lødemel and Moreira, 2014; Dinan, 2019). Work experience programmes also vary. While some focus on

the development of very basic employee skills (for example, being on time at work, listening to a boss, keeping up the work rhythm, and so on) (Marston and McDonald, 2008; Brodtkin and Marston, 2013), others seek to enhance the employability and human capital of recipients and set up work programmes in order to develop job skills for improving both short- and long-term labour market prospects (Torfing 1999; Dean et al, 2005). This article focuses on the first type of work experience programmes which in academic literature has also been referred to as *thin* ‘work first’ programmes (for example, Theodore and Peck, 2000; Carter and Whithworth, 2017).<sup>1</sup> To the extent that benefit recipients are *obliged* to participate in these work experience programmes, I will use the term *mandatory* work programmes (MWP). In addition, to indicate that these work experience programmes exclusively focus on the development of very basic employee skills, I will use the term *thin* MWPs.

The article is structured in the following way. First, it analyses relevant legal documents and legal literature on the right to work in order to establish the conditions under which participants of an MWP realise the fundamental right to work. It examines in particular whether and to which extent the right to work can be realised in case participation in an MWP does *not* result in a transition to (non-precarious) employment. This is an issue which, thus far, has not been explored in the legal literature. Based on the social policy literature it then considers the extent to which *thin* MWPs comply with the conditions necessary to safeguard the right to work. Subsequently, after providing an overview of the context and methods, the article presents the findings of a qualitative research conducted on *thin* MWPs for social assistance recipients in the Netherlands. The findings show that – partly in contrast to the expectations based on the social policy literature – some of the participants of these MWPs are able to realise the right to work to the extent that they feel recognised and gain self-respect while working in an MWP. The findings also indicate that participants prefer the security of social assistance benefits over a transition to the precarious labour markets. The concluding section therefore, argues for the implementation of a (secure) job guarantee as a preferable means to realising the right to work for social assistance recipients.

## The right to work

This section analyses the participation in MWPs in the context of the fundamental right to work. To this end, it first provides an overview of the main elements of the right to work. Subsequently, it assesses whether MWPs realise the right to work in case they do not result in welfare to (stable) work transitions.

The right to work is enshrined in various international agreements, two of which contain the most important conventions as far as socio-economic rights are concerned: the ICESCR and the ESC. In both treaties the right to work is a central provision, which is partly demonstrated by the fact that the right to work in Art. 6 ICESCR and Art. 1 ESC precedes a number of substantial social rights: such as those concerning working conditions and fair wages (O’Cinneide, 2014). The right to work, laid down in Article 6 ICESCR and Article 1 ESC, consists of several elements. The first element concerns the responsibility of the ratifying States to achieve high and stable levels of employment. Second, the right to work concerns the States’ responsibility to create equal opportunities for access to labour markets and to combat discrimination in the labour market. Third, it imposes an obligation on States bound by the Convention

to enable workers to perform *decent* work under adequate working conditions and to generate an income that enables them to provide for themselves and their families independently. Fourth, the right to work comprises the right to freely chosen work.

In the legal literature MWP have generally been considered in conformity with the right to work, provided that they promote the transition of the (long-term) unemployed to paid employment (Freedland et al, 2007; Dermine, 2020b). However, it has been noted that the obligation placed upon MWP participants to accept temporary precarious (agency) work (instead of permanent jobs) may be in breach of the right to decent work, particularly when this results in a downward pressure on working conditions or the crowding out of regular work (Dermine, 2020a; Mantouvalou, 2020). In addition, MWPs have been considered in violation of the right to work where the participation in an MWP amounts to a duty to work (instead of the right to work) (Amir Paz Fuchs, 2014), and where the referral to an MWP does not respect the right to freely chosen work (Dermine, 2020a; 2020b; Mantouvalou, 2020). As yet, however, legal scholars have not considered whether ‘being at work’ in an MWP could be considered as satisfying the right to work. In what follows, I identify arguments in favour and against the view that ‘being at work’ in an MWP can be considered as realising the right to work.

An important argument against participation in MWPs is that they are not considered ‘real jobs’ for example, MWP participants receive social benefits instead of wages. Indeed, the preparatory documents of Article 6 ICESR indicate that the work involved should be *productive* work (Dermine, 2020a) which, according to Article 1 ESC and Article 6 ICESCR enables the worker to *earn his living*. In addition, the documents of the monitoring body of the ESC (the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR)) and the monitoring body of the ICESCR (the UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)) normally mention the objective of realising high levels of ‘employment’ (that is, paid work). As Nickel explains, ‘work’ in the context of the right to work should be interpreted in a ‘narrow sense’, as ‘work that is in some organized form of production (as in farms, factories and offices) and oriented towards generating income for oneself and one’s dependants’ (2014: 138). This narrow sense should be distinguished from a broad sense according to which work is simply productive activity requiring effort.

Notwithstanding these valid points, legal documents and legal literature also provide arguments in favour of qualifying ‘being at work’ in an MWP as realising the right to work. These arguments emphasise the *value* of being at work, over the qualification of the work as a *regular paid* job.

In the first place, following Collins (2014), it could be argued that if we wish to consider the right to work as a human right, we need to examine the deeper values underlying the right to work. Indeed, instead of being a means to other rights or goals, human rights are usually regarded as ends in themselves. This implies that the right to work should not exclusively be viewed as a means to reach full employment; as a human right, the right to work should, above all, be grounded in values such as dignity, self-respect or self-esteem, and self-development or self-actualisation. This explanation of the right to work is supported in various authoritative legal documents which, referring to the importance of work in terms of dignity, self-recognition and self-development, emphasise the intrinsic value of work. For example, according to the preparatory documents of Article 6 ICESR, the right to work ‘did not mean simply the right to remuneration but the right of every human being to do a job freely chosen

by himself, one which gave *meaning to his life*' (Craven, 1995: 197).<sup>2</sup> In addition, as the CESCR stated in its General Comment on Article 6 ICESR, the right to work is a human right, an inseparable and inherent part of human dignity that contributes to the worker's recognition with their community and their personal development.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the CESCR and ECSR have not limited the concept of 'work' to paid jobs. For example, for the CESCR the right to work 'encompasses all forms of work, whether independent work or dependent wage-paid work'.<sup>4</sup> In addition, legal scholars have argued – regarding the human rights character of the right to work – that 'work' in the right to work also includes unpaid work, such as an internships or domestic work (Mundlak 2007; Collins, 2014).

Hence, while MWP are generally viewed as measures that promote the right to work in so far these work programmes increase opportunities to enter paid employment, it could be argued that being at work in an MWP may also realise the right to work, albeit on the condition that 1) it does not result in a downward pressure on working conditions or the crowding out of regular work, 2) it is conformity with the right to freely chosen work, and 3) being at work in an MWP is grounded in values such as dignity, self-respect or self-esteem, and self-development or self-actualisation.

## Realising the right to work in *thin* MWPs: existing social policy research

Based on an exploration of the social policy literature, this section considers whether participation in *thin* MWPs can be considered in conformity with the right to work as analysed in the previous section.

With regard to the effectivity of MWPs, it should be noted that most ALMP evaluation studies have investigated the effectivity of general ALMPs which include a variety of (*thin* and *thick*) work experience programmes, training programmes and work seeking activities. In addition, these evaluation studies have often focused exclusively on the activation of *recipients of unemployment benefits*, instead of recipients of social assistance benefits who are furthest from the labour market. These studies have generally shown that the effectivity of ALMPs to move the unemployed to regular employment is negligible. *Thick* ALMPs which emphasise human capital accumulation, and which promote intensive contacts between the unemployed and the employment office are generally most effective according to these studies (for example, Card et al, 2018).

A few studies have explicitly focused on the effects of *thin* ALMPs for *recipients of social assistance*. A recent basic income experiment conducted in various municipalities in the Netherlands investigated the impact of work-related requirements, among which was the duty to participate in *thin* MWPs, on the behaviour of social assistance recipients. This experiment revealed no statistically significant correlation between the changes of moving to the regular labour market between social assistance recipients who were and who were not subjected to these requirements (CBS, 2020; also see Groot et al, 2019). More generally there is no evidence that *thin* MWPs effectively move social assistance recipients to regular employment (for an overview see Penninsi and Baker Collins, 2017 and Rafass, 2017).

Should recipients of social assistance benefits manage to transit to a regular job, they frequently enter temporary precarious (agency) jobs and often return to the employment office or welfare office for benefits when their employment contract

has terminated (Rubery et al, 2018). In other words, these workers go back and forth between social benefits and precarious forms of work without being able to improve their position (Bruttel and Sol 2006; Schildrick et al, 2012). This is especially true for the Netherlands, where labour market insecurity has rapidly grown over the past decades (Hartog and Salverda, 2018). As such, it has been argued that *thin* MWP, instead of securing access to *decent* jobs and *decent wages*, supply the labour market with a ‘reserve army of available labour’ with which to discipline current workers [and] depress real wages’ (Whitworth, 2016: 418).

While empirical research suggests that *thin* MWPs fail to contribute to realising the right to work to the extent that they do not move social assistance recipients to stable jobs, under specific conditions, ‘being at work’ in an MWP may also by itself realise the right to work (see previous section). The remainder of this section examines to what extent, according to the social policy literature, these conditions are fulfilled in practice.

A first condition in order to conform with the right to work is that the work performed in the MWP does not result in a downward pressure on working conditions or the crowding out of regular work. To my knowledge there are no quantitative studies available in this respect (also see SCP, 2018: 71). However, some studies have shown that the transition of recipients of social assistance benefits to *subsidised* work do indeed result in crowding out and a downward pressure on wages (SCP, 2018: 70 referring to Blundell et al, 2003 and Lise et al, 2004).

A second important condition for realising the right to work in an MWP, is that the work performed should be freely chosen work. Regarding the terminology (*mandatory* work programmes) it is doubtful whether this condition could ever be fulfilled. Indeed, in the literature we find many examples of ‘hard paternalist’ programmes where welfare recipients are obliged to work in return for their income benefits or perform work activities ‘for the sake of activity’ without improving their economic situation or future prospects or considering the recipients’ preferences (Marston and McDonald, 2008; Brodtkin and Marston, 2013; Whitworth, 2016). Their goal seems to be, above all, to deter recipients from asking for benefits (Peck, 2001) and punishing benefit recipients not wishing to work (Hatton, 2018).

A final condition which has to be fulfilled in order to realise the principle of the right to work is that the work in an MWP should be grounded in values such as dignity, self-respect or self-esteem, and self-development or self-actualisation. At the outset, the aforementioned ‘hard paternalist’ (*thin*) MWPs do not seem to fulfil this condition. Indeed, qualitative research has revealed how MWP participants are subjected to degrading and dehumanising treatment (for example, Hatton, 2020).

In addition, there are a few quantitative studies that have measured the wellbeing of ALMP participants. These studies are relevant for the subject of this article as the wellbeing of MWP participants is an indicator of the extent to which ALMPs contribute to participants’ dignity and self-respect. Unfortunately, however, none of these studies distinguish *thin* MWPs from other ALMPs. For example, all (*thin* and *thick*) work experience programmes are identified as ‘human capital ALMPs’ which also include training programmes (for an overview see Sage, 2015; also see Wang et al, 2020). Hence, while these studies suggest that participation in an ALMP has a positive effect on wellbeing compared to non-participation (for example, Strandh, 2001; Andersen, 2008), it is not clear whether participation in *thin* (sometimes hard paternalist) MWPs have these effects as well. Wulfgramm’s (2011) quantitative study

on Germany's one-euro-jobs, which are to some extent comparable to *thin* MWP in the Netherlands (see [Eleveld, 2014](#)), is an exception to these (broad) ALMP studies. Wulfgramm found that participants in one-euro-jobs reported higher life satisfaction than unemployed non-participants but lower life satisfaction than employed people. However, these effects were not statistically significant.

In sum, even if we stretch the fundamental right to work so as to include work performed by recipients of social benefits in a *thin* MWP, we do not find evidence for recipients' participation in *thin* MWPs being in conformity with the right to work.

## Context, data and methods

Since the implementation of the Participation Act of 2015, participation in an MWP can be imposed on *all* social assistance recipients in the Netherlands, except for those who are entirely (100%) incapacitated for work. While municipalities are responsible for the implementation of WTW policies, the Participation Act has enacted a uniform sanctioning system for all municipalities, stipulating that social recipients who do not comply with work-related obligations or refuse a job offer, will receive a sanction to a maximum reduction of 100 per cent of monthly benefits. Upon recurrence, this period may be extended for one or two months (see further [Eleveld et al, 2020](#)).

This study was conducted in three municipalities in the Netherlands in 2017 and 2018. These municipalities were selected because they all required welfare recipients to participate in *thin* MWPs. We selected municipalities with over 50,000 inhabitants, because smaller municipalities normally do not have the capacity to organise these kinds of MWPs. To include municipal differences to the fullest extent possible we included one municipality that belongs to one of the four principal municipalities in the Netherlands (with over 300,000 inhabitants) and two medium-sized municipalities with just over 60,000 inhabitants, located near to the Randstad, a megalopolis in the central-western part of the Netherlands, and the other situated in the Northern part of the Netherlands, relatively far away from the Randstad.

In all municipalities, recipients first attend a work-training programme to learn how to prepare a CV, apply for jobs and so on. Subsequently, they can be referred to a *thin* MWP where they perform non-paid work activities in order to develop or to improve very basic employee skills. Two MWPs compel employers to hire social assistance recipients who have been participating between 26 and 40 hours a week for a period from two to four months at a so-called probationary MWP. In other MWPs, recipients would normally work between 20 and 32 hours for a minimum period of three months and often (much) longer. The work involved in all programmes is relatively straightforward and includes such things as (simple) production activities, call centre work, maintaining municipal green spaces, postal delivery, canteen work or serving coffee to people in nursing homes.

In order to consider the extent to which the work at MWPs is grounded in values such as dignity, self-respect or self-esteem, and self-development or self-actualisation, this article draws on 42 semi-structured interviews with (former) MWP participants. At each MWP of the 17 (*thin*) MWPs visited by the researcher at least two participants were interviewed, except for two MWPs where the researcher interviewed only one participant. Five respondents were interviewed in their private homes.<sup>5</sup> Generally, the work supervisors of these MWPs had asked the participants whether they would like to cooperate with the research. The interviews lasted between one and two hours.

At the time of the interview the majority of the respondents had been participating at the MPW for less than six months, although five respondents had already been participating at one or more MWP for more than two years. Twenty-four women and 18 men were interviewed. Most respondents were aged 40 or older and three-quarters of the respondents had a Dutch ethnic background. A third of the respondents reported that they were partly incapacitated for work.

Interviews with welfare officers and municipal policymakers provided information on other aspects of the right to work, such as the effectivity of the municipal MWPs and the downward pressure on working conditions. Additional interviews with work supervisors, minor conversations with other MWP participants and about 45 observations at the welfare offices (for example, conversations between welfare officers and welfare recipients) and on the work floor provided the necessary context for interpreting the interviews.

Transcripts of the interviews and field notes were coded in Atlas TI and the interviews with the participants were analysed based on the methods developed by [Ritchie et al \(2003\)](#), which consists of three steps. The first step, entailing the labelling of the data, implied the construction of initial codes (or 'labels'), which were closely related to the interview topics. These initial codes included 'the choice of the MWPs'; 'the working conditions at the MWPs'; 'the relationship with the work supervisor, welfare officer and their fellow workers'; 'the likes and dislikes of the work in the MWP'; 'comparison with previous regular work'; and 'the prospects of regular work transitions'. The second analytical step entails the identification of descriptive key dimensions. During this step new descriptive codes were formulated which captured dimensions observed in the initial coding process. These codes included 'feeling respected'; 'feeling disrespected'; and 'the value of wage'. A third analytical step entails the detection of explanatory accounts. For this step Atlas TI was used to establish patterns between codes (for example, 'the value of wage' and 'feelings of (dis)respect') and specific variables (for example, 'work in MWPs' and 'previous regular work'). The advantage of this kind of qualitative research and analysis is that the researcher does not bring up value-laden terms as feeling respected or dis-respected which will reduce the chances of influencing the interviews (and the respondents' interpretation).

## Findings

The findings of the empirical research are presented in relation to the elements of the right to work which have been identified in the previous sections: the transition, to regular and decent work, the crowding out of regular work, the right to freely chosen work and the extent to which the work is grounded in values such as dignity, self-respect or self-esteem, and self-development or self-actualisation.

### *Municipal policies*

This section, which is based on the interviews with welfare officers and municipal policymakers, considers first, to what extent the participation in the MWPs results in transition to properly paid work. Thereafter, it examines some examples of the crowding out of work. Finally, it addresses the question of whether the work at MWPs constitutes freely chosen work.



At the outset, it was remarkable that quite a number of interviewed welfare officers and municipal policymakers believed that MWP were not very effective. In their opinion, this was due to a combination of 'internal' and 'external' factors. Regarding the internal factors, they argued that participants had a 'long distance' to the labour market because of long-term unemployment, low education, low proficiency in the Dutch language and motivation problems. However, notwithstanding these welfare officers and municipal policymakers' opinions, none of the investigated municipalities systematically assessed the effectivity of MWP in terms of welfare to work transitions.

Welfare officers and municipal policymakers also pointed out external factors such as the high demands that the current labour market places on employees, (age) discrimination and the high flexibility of the Dutch labour market, as a result of which social assistance recipients tended to move between social benefits and temporary low paid jobs. Especially people most in need of security, such as low-skilled and/or structurally handicapped people, could be at risk of being out of work again after a relatively short period of (subsidised) employment. As one policy adviser put it:

'The fact that the entire labour market is much more flexible, with short-term contracts, is sometimes difficult with social assistance recipients who may have just come out of a debt situation or are still in it. The uncertainty inherent in short-term contracts does not help them at all. This development is very much at odds with what the person entitled to social assistance actually needs. And you can't just stop it.'

(Policymaker 3)

The findings suggest that municipal polices re-enforced the going back and forth between social assistance benefits and flexible temporary (agency) work. For example, two municipalities had implemented probationary contracts, which required a (private) company to hire a social assistance recipient who had completed the probationary period at an MWP. However, often the company was not interested in extending the first temporary employment contract. This was due to the fact that the company received a municipal subsidy at the start of the employment contract or eventually during the first months. Consequently, it was more lucrative to start with a new social assistance recipient ('for free') on a probationary contract and receive a municipal subsidy than to extend the temporary contract and pay higher collective wages. This system was also lucrative from the municipal point of view. As one policymaker quickly calculated:

'We normally pay €3000- subsidy for six months and €6000- subsidy for one year [after a company hires a social assistance recipient]. Social assistance benefits cost €12000 a year for one person. Then [the amount of money you have to pay for social assistance benefits] is higher anyway.'

(Policymaker 3)

Hence, to some extent, municipal MWP policies seemed to be contributing to the maintenance and possible deterioration of precarious working conditions.

Moreover, the findings suggest that at least in some of the cases, the work in MWPs fostered the displacement of regular workers. For example, frequently, social assistance recipients were doing the same kind of work as regular workers and, sometimes, social

assistance recipients even replaced (regular) sick workers. One employer mentioned that he would run into deep trouble if the MWP participants (his only ‘personnel’) reported ill, and another employer said he would hire temporary agency workers in case the municipality did not ‘deliver’ sufficient social assistance recipients. One company manager bluntly stated:

‘When we say to the municipality that we need more [MWP participants], I go to the welfare office and pick out the best.’

(Work supervisor/manager 4)

Finally, it is debateable whether the investigated municipal policies were in conformity with the right to freely chosen work as social assistance recipients did not have a formal say in the welfare officers’ decision as to whether they would be assigned to an MWP and to which MWP they would be sent. In addition, the welfare officer’s proposal for a specific MWP was not (legally) bound by considerations such as the recipient’s work experience, education or preferences.

### *Experiences of MWP participants*

This section discusses the extent to which MWP participants experienced dignity, self-respect or self-esteem, and self-development or self-actualisation.

Overall, the findings on recipients’ experiences at MWPs were mixed. A great number of recipients felt disrespected regarding their lack of voice (and choice) when they were referred to an MWP. Some just accepted it as they knew that refusal would only cause more (financial) trouble. Others expressed their anger more overtly about being referred to an MWP without having a say. However, in the end, all social assistance recipients were left with no choice but to accept the situation and in the course of time, even recipients who had initially resisted the obligation to participate in an MWP started to enjoy the work. Conversely, recipients who accepted work at the MWP without openly resisting the offer, or optimistically thought that the MWP would contribute to their self-development and result in a regular job, were disappointed and began to dislike its compulsory character. Generally, however, participants mentioned both positive and negative aspects of their work at the MWP.

Starting with the negative assessments: almost half of the interviewed participants complained that they could not develop any professional or other useful skills at the MWPs which was contrary to its main aim. Generally, participants thought that ‘learning general workers’ skills’ was pointless. As Agnes put it:

“‘Getting out of bed in time”, “keeping your appointment”, “being on time”, “working long days”; it is all there; I get used to these things within a week.’

(Agnes)

She said that she would ‘do her time’ and then return to her more rewarding and useful volunteer work as administrative support for people in need. Agnes also thought that this work would give her more opportunities for self-development.

The emphasis on general workers’ skills also explained why Agnes and a number of other participants felt bored at the ‘mind-numbing work’ at some of the MWPs. They argued that the work at the MWP would be better if they were allowed to do it for

fewer hours a week, or when they could alternate the boring work with other more interesting work. Alternatively, these participants would have preferred having a real job (doing perhaps the same mind-numbing work) instead of performing this work at the MWP. At least that would give them the status and the wage of ‘real workers’.

Participants not only felt that participation in an MWP did not contribute to their self-development, some also felt particularly belittled being at work as a *welfare recipient*, and therefore, disrespected. For example, participants who had to pick up dirt in the streets said that they did not like to walk through the streets in their (orange) uniforms, as others would probably notice that they were benefit recipients. These participants and others, such as those working in the municipal gardens and delivering mail were also afraid to walk into people who knew them and, for this reason, they sometimes refused to wear the compulsory work wear. One participant even said that she rather preferred to be recognised in the street doing community service (as an alternative to a prison sentence) than to be recognised as an MWP participant. Hence, in her perception, working as a welfare recipient had a lower status than being a convicted criminal. A number of participants had also experienced discourteous treatment at the welfare office which, as previous research has shown (Patrick, 2016), probably re-enforced the negative self-image as a welfare recipient.

As a researcher, I also had the opportunity to experience to some extent how it felt being viewed as a welfare recipient. During the research, I (aged over 50) participated in a garden project, next to a hotel belonging to a famous family company. While working, one of the family members of this hotel walked through the garden with her 4-year-old son. I experienced this as if the ‘queen’ had come along inspecting her castle gardens. She said to her son: “Watch *the girls* who are doing the vegetables,” and to us she said that we had to sweep the small garden path to make it look a little tidier. Unfortunately, the woman (also aged over 50) with whom I was working revealed that I was a researcher not a participant, and it struck me how the tone of the conversation rapidly shifted from paternalistic to more respectful.

The fact that participants did not receive a wage appeared to be an important source for feelings of disrespect. Quite a number of MWP participants emphasised that having the status of a regular worker would make them feel more respected and that being paid a wage also ‘felt better’. As Yvonne said:

‘people would not look at you in the way they do now, being on benefits [...] work gives you a kind of status. And everyone thinks that this will not happen to them, that they will not get unemployed. But then it happens and then you are down-and-out; [work] is so important for people. It is seen as a reason to exist.’

(Yvonne)

Being recognised as a ‘worker’, instead of being a social assistance recipient participating at an MWP, was important in particular for those participants who had been working for many years in regular jobs, as was the case for most participants. For example, on one occasion, a participant signing a consent form for the research, was quite upset when she noticed the word ‘re-integration’ (that is, ‘welfare-to-work-transition’) on the form. She said:

“re-integration”? That is not how it feels for me. This word sounds like I have never done anything!’

(Marleen)

She and other MWP participants, believed that their work at the MWP should be recognised as real work. Talking to others about their MWP work as ‘their job’ and the benefits as ‘their salary’ made them feel more respected. It should be noticed, though, that participants not only preferred to have normal salary because of the status of the work, but also because they needed more money. For example, some participants said they would not have a problem staying longer at the MWP even if the welfare office did not force them to do so, on the condition that they would receive more ‘wage’.

In contrast to these responses, however, other MWP participants, some of whom had initially been angry about the duty to participate at an MWP, valued the work at the MWPs fairly highly. Indeed, a third of the interviewed participants said that they gained recognition because of the work and that it had enhanced their self-respect. Some even felt more respected and recognised at the MWP than at their previous precarious jobs. For example, Marleen, a 57-year-old woman who had been cleaning schools and vacation houses after having worked for 35 years as a photo editor, recalled that she felt very unhappy, depressed and tired in the period she worked as a cleaner. She did not earn enough with her cleaning job and completed her salary with social assistance benefits. However, after having started at an MWP (a call-centre), she felt that she was slowly gaining some self-respect and recognition again.

Most interviewed participants (almost three-quarters of them) also mentioned that they liked the work because they could socialise with others. As Harry, a participant at the garden project said:

‘for me it was very good and now I have found some rhythm. You feel more satisfied, because you have done something. The work also tires you, hence you sleep much better, and I lost a lot of weight. I also like the personal aspect, to be around people again [...] overall this is the nicest job I’ve ever done.’

(Harry)

Working at the MWP, the participants could forget their daily personal problems and made themselves feel more useful, which contributed to feelings of dignity. As Jan put it:

‘I’m over 50. No employer wants me. I’m happy with the work programme. If I was sitting at home the whole day, I’d go crazy, or become a heavy drinker. I think I’d start with my first beer at midday.’

(Jan)

In addition, more than a third of the participants said that the work at the MWP helped them to develop themselves. Participants also mentioned that they felt much less pressure compared to the regular work they used to do. As John said:

‘it feels like a warm bath compared with my previous jobs.’

(John)

Nonetheless, like a lot of welfare officers and policymakers (see earlier in article), MWP participants were sceptical about their chances of obtaining a regular paid job due to their participation at the MWP. Only a small minority thought that the MWP was a useful transition to paid work. Yet, the idea that working at the MWP did not contribute to a transition to a regular job did not necessarily bother them. Being entitled to social assistance benefits provided a stable, albeit meagre, income. Indeed, for some participants the security and structure that the MWP offered was of pivotal importance, particularly for participants who had experienced uncertain times in the past. For example, Simon who had done some years in prison said:

‘I know guys who were working here at the MWP and now (after they have transited to a temporary regular job) they are sitting [again] at home with their benefits. This should absolutely not happen with me. I have to continue working.’

(Simon)

The stability of an MWP in combination with social assistance benefits was sometimes also preferred over the insecurity resulting from precarious labour markets. For example, Mandy, who had previously worked on a zero-hour contract said:

‘one day they call me and the other day they don’t. And at the end I will be the one who has to pay the bills.’

(Mandy)

She admitted that she had purposely worked less in order to be still eligible for social assistance benefits. For Mandy, being on welfare benefits and working in an MWP provided a safe haven in this insecure world.

In sum, while some of the participants felt that the work at the MWP did not contribute to their self-development, nor their chances to move to regular paid work, not all participants felt that way. For some of them, the work at the *thin* MWP helped them to develop themselves. What’s more, while some of the participants felt disrespected and belittled at the MWP (and in their encounters at the welfare office), other participants instead emphasised that they gained self-recognition and self-respect as a result of their work in the MWP. They preferred being at work in the MWP rather than moving to the insecure labour market. Yet, most of the participants missed the status of ‘real work’ in connection with ‘real wages’, which would clearly enhance their feelings of self-respect at work.

## Conclusion and outlook

The social policy literature suggests that work performed in *thin* MWPs does not conform with the right to work, even when we stretch the right to work to include being at work in an MWP. The findings in the empirical study indicate, on the one hand, that the work in the MWPs cannot be considered to conform with the right to work since, first, participation in MWPs did not result in the transition to regular (and permanent) work; second, on some occasions it resulted in the crowding out of work; and, third, it generally failed to comply with the right to freely chosen work. On the other hand, however, the findings suggest that participation in MWPs enhanced

the welfare recipients' dignity, self-respect, self-recognition and their opportunities for self-development. From a human rights perspective on the right to work (which emphasises that the right to work is grounded in these values) this implies that some of the participants were, at least to some extent, able to realise the right to work. Obviously, it is not claimed here that these findings are statistically representative; the number of MWP participants claiming that they felt being respected, recognised and so on may even be biased due to the way the respondents were selected. Nevertheless, the results do indicate that – under specific conditions – MWPs may have these effects on their participants. As such, these findings partly contradict previous findings on *thin* (hard paternalist) MWPs and encourage further research that (instead of current ALMP studies) exclusively focuses on *thin* MWPs.

The case study also suggests that MWP participants were struggling: they preferred the dignity, status and money that comes along with a regular job; however, they also feared the insecurity of the precarious labour market. This is a noteworthy dilemma which is also touched upon in a brilliant recent study by Erin [Hatton \(2020\)](#). According to [Hatton \(2020\)](#), the binary between 'good' jobs and 'bad' jobs, constructed in the precarious work literature (for example, [Kalleberg, 2013](#)) does not hold. Then, whereas good jobs are characterised by security and stability, these are also 'hallmarks of [...] coercive labor relations', such as prison work and workfare ([Hatton, 2020: 209–10](#)). Likewise, my research demonstrated that for some of the social assistance recipients, mandatory work provided security and stability normally ascribed to 'good jobs' and – in the context of the right to work – to 'decent jobs'. In other words, welfare recipients seemed to prefer one form of unfree work – MWPs – over another form of unfree work – regular precarious work ([Hatton, 2015; Lebaron and Philips, 2019](#)).

Given, however, that (*thin*) MWPs tend to violate the right to freely chosen work and that MWP participants do not receive wages (which enhance feelings of respect), participation in MWPs cannot be considered an ideal means to realising the right to work. A (regular) job offer that, like the entitlement to social benefits, provides security and stability and like (some) *thin* MWPs enhance welfare recipients' dignity, self-respect, self-recognition and their opportunities for self-development, seems to be more aligned with the right to work, provided that the following conditions are fulfilled: 1) the job offer is tailored to the needs and preferences of the participants; 2) a refusal of the job offer does not produce a (harsh) sanction; 3) the risk of stigmatisation is minimised (see for example, [Girardi et al, 2019](#)); and 4) the job does not put a downward pressure on working conditions or result in the crowding out of decent work. Under these conditions, earlier proposals for a job guarantee (for example, [Gregg and Layard, 2009](#)) and related proposals, deserve to be further explored as viable alternatives for *thin* MWPs to realising the right to work.

It should be noted however, that for many welfare recipients real job security in the form of a job guarantee will be out of reach. These recipients should be offered special (work) programmes which should not be tested against the right to work, but against their effectivity in enhancing recipients' health, their sense of dignity and – more broadly – their sense of being socially included. Moreover, in order to prevent social exclusion, these special programmes should seek to positively incentivise recipients to participate, instead of punishing them ([Handler, 2004; Eleveld, 2018](#)).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is acknowledged that in practice there are more and hybrid combinations of *thin* and *thick* regimes (Carter and Whithworth, 2017; Jordan, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Italics are added.

<sup>3</sup> CESCR General Comment No. 18, General Comment No 18: The right to work, Article 6 of the ICESCR, UN Doc E/C12/GC/18 (2005) para 1 and 4.

<sup>4</sup> General Comment No. 18, para 6.

<sup>5</sup> Two of them had stopped working at the work programme; in three other cases there was no appropriate spot available to interview them on the work floor.

## Funding

This work was supported by NWO (the Dutch Research Council) under (Veni) Grant number 451-15-005.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the two reviewers for their comments on this article.

## Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests.

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