

**Title:** A critical discourse analysis of the labour market activation of vulnerable women.

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### 1. Research goals and theoretical framework

This study ties in with the debate whether labour market activation of vulnerable women increases or decreases emancipation. Labour market activation refers to policies that promote employment among economically-inactive people (i.e. not seeking and/or not available for work; ILO, 1998). In general, activation is described by scholars and policymakers as a means to emancipation by increasing economic independency (De Cuyper et al., 2018). Yet, feminist scholars argue that labour market activation of vulnerable women often leads to paid reproductive labour (e.g., cleaning, cooking, childcare, elderly care) (Parsland & Ulmestig, 2021). While this may (re)integrate these women into the labour market, it hinders emancipation by pushing them into devalued, traditionally female labour.

The current debate about the emancipatory power of labour market activation focuses primarily on employment outcomes. However, feminist concerns make the activation discourses of governments and the organisations implementing activation policies, an important focus of investigation. So far, little is known about the discursive strategies through which certain activation policies, that reproduce traditional gender norms (and rather serve the interests of governments), are legitimised and presented as emancipatory. This is important though: how activation is legitimised by discursive strategies, may determine what emancipation can mean and therefore also what (employment) opportunities can be created. This prompts the question of how the emancipatory goal within the labour market activation of vulnerable women is discursively legitimised.

To explore how labour market activation is legitimised, we use insights from Social Reproduction Theory (SRT; Bhattacharya, 2017). SRT is a critical, feminist theory that looks at the relationship between gender, race and class to better understand the sources of women's oppression. The theory argues that gender roles and gender relations are interlinked in the maintenance and reproduction of patriarchal and capitalist structures. By applying this framework, we aim to identify the underlying

social structures that are shaped and reproduced by the discursive legitimization of activation. In doing so, we will gain insight into why activation is structured in a certain way and what emancipation within this structure can mean.

## **2. Research design and approach to data analysis**

We conduct a single case study within the context of an activation program in Flanders (Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). This program aims to bring vulnerable (lower educated, migrant background) women closer to the labour market by means of individual and collective counselling.

In particular, we conduct a critical discourse analysis of interviews with key actors (i.e., management and trainers) and of organizational documents (e.g., project description, reports, intern communication,...). Critical discourse analysis provides a method to investigate and expose social inequalities and controversial practices (Fairclough, 2013).

We collected data during March and June. Preliminary findings show that the discourse of 'emancipation' prevails in describing the target group and in the organizational goals. The women are portrayed as being in a disadvantaged position: at home, isolated from society and with low self-esteem. Activation is constructed as a means to empower them, and employment as a means to economic independence, a source of integration, a social network, and increased self-esteem, etc. At the same time, those women are also constructed as women with a talent for care (because of the time spent at home) and consequently as being particularly suitable for jobs in the care sector. This leads to a paradox: vulnerable women should be liberated from unpaid reproductive labour at home and that yet at the same time they have a talent for reproductive labour which is used for emancipation and integration. It seems that the stereotype of vulnerable women with a natural talent for caring is both constructed as a means to promote or limit integration, depending on the goal. The way in which the target group and emancipation are constructed legitimises why it is sufficient to pursue reproductive labour within labour market activation. By critically examining the discourse, we show that certain stereotypes regarding gender, race and social class are shaped and reproduced.

## **3. Theoretical and practical implications**

This study complements the current individual research orientation, which assumes that personal circumstances are the main driver of activation effectiveness. We do this by shedding light on how activation is also shaped by institutional norms and values. We emphasise the importance of such a holistic, critical view because policy and research imply that once personal barriers are removed, foreign-born women are free to (re)enter the labour market. This overlooks the fact that these women

find themselves in an institutional space where structural boundaries enable and constrain their movements.

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