

Cross-National Research Papers

Sixth Series:

Improving Policy Responses and Outcomes to Socio-Economic Challenges: Changing Family Structures, Policy and Practice

## **4. The Employment Relationship and Family Life**

Edited by

**Peter Ackers**

Contributors

**Peter Ackers**

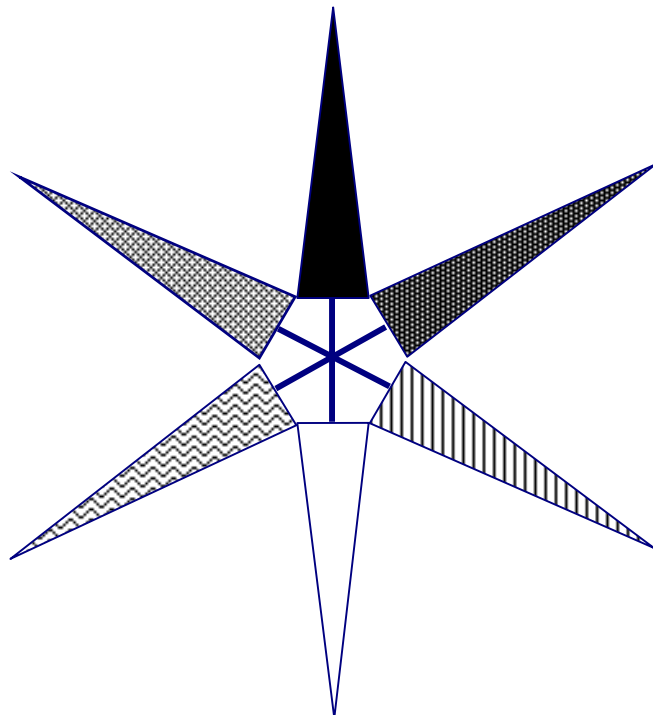
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**Devi Sacchetto**

**Elizabeth Such**



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*Edited by*  
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### Sixth Series

#### Improving Policy Responses and Outcomes to Socio-Economic Challenges: Changing Family Structures, Policy and Practice

## 4. The Employment Relationship and Family Life

### Series Editor's Foreword

The papers included in this sixth series of *Cross-National Research Papers* build on the contributions published in the fifth series. They develop with greater breadth and in greater depth work previously carried out on the relationship between socio-demographic trends and policy responses in Europe.

The materials from which the present papers are derived were compiled for a three-year research project funded by the European Commission under Framework Programme 5 (HPSE-CT-1999-00031). The research extended earlier work carried out for the European Commission, Directorate General 5, Employment, Industrial Relations and Social Affairs, between 1997 and 1998.

The primary aim of the IPROSEC project, launched in 2000, was to inform policy by developing a greater understanding of socio-demographic change in selected European Union member and applicant states, the social and economic challenges such changes present, and the policy responses formulated by national governments and at European level. The research was particularly concerned with changing family structures and relationships. The project team undertook to observe and analyse the policy process, inputs, outcomes and impacts, with a view to assessing how policy learning occurs, and how, in turn, policy development influences socio-demographic change. In keeping with the aims and objectives of the Cross-National Research Group, which was established in 1985 as an informal network of researchers interested in the theory, methodology, management and practice of cross-national research on topics in the social sciences, the project was also designed to document the cross-national comparative research process.

The IPROSEC project brought together researchers from a range of disciplines, from different parts of the European Union and from three candidate countries, with experience in carrying out cross-national comparative projects. Together with invited contributions, the papers in this sixth series track the development of the project and provide an appropriate means of disseminating comments on the operation of each stage of the research, while also reporting interim findings.

*Linda Hantrais*

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*Linda Hantrais, Project Co-ordinator  
European Research Centre, Loughborough University*

# 1. Business Matters: How the Character of the Employment Relationship Shapes Family Life

*Peter Ackers*

It is probably a commonplace that, other things remaining equal (namely 'social' factors), economic prosperity is conducive to stable family life. Full employment and good wages and conditions provide the material basis for good housing, regular holidays, adequate leisure time, a strong welfare state and so on. By contrast, mass unemployment, poorly paid and insecure work put added strain on families. It is less often observed, however, that the character of the employment relationship in a given nation, country or company, also shapes relations between parents and their children. While the employment relationship is related to economic performance, it is not reducible to it (Edwards, 1995). For instance, two societies of almost equal prosperity, say Sweden and the USA, may strike a very different balance between stakeholders such as investors, customers, employees and the wider community. This is linked, in turn, to substantial variations in the distribution of wealth and income, for instance in executive pay levels.

In contemporary societies, the employment relationship has been conceptualized in several different ways. Each one is associated with a particular approach to employment regulation. One approach to capitalist economies, well established in neo-liberal economics, sees employment as a market transaction, like any other. The employer, as a property owner, buys or 'hires' employees in the labour market. Two individuals agree a price and what work will be done for it. In this view, employer or shareholder rights are paramount. The main problem with this conceptualization is that it does not acknowledge the long-term and open-ended character of the employment relationship. Indeed, it conflates this with a commercial contract, such as hiring a builder to repair a roof. There are several consequences. First, because the employer still has to determine what actual work the employee will do on a day-to-day basis, this is a recipe for authoritarian relations at work, which may spread into the rest of society, including the home. Second, employers do not acknowledge the dependence of, or their social responsibility towards, employees. In a real individualized labour market, the bargain is usually highly asymmetrical, with the employer much more powerful than the average employee. Writ large at a societal level, this conception spells low wages, long hours and job insecurity for the poorer, less skilled sections of society. The implications for family life are fairly predictable, although poor working class communities can be associated with 'strong' families.

For much of the twentieth century, socialism was presented in radical quarters as a comprehensive alternative to capitalism, as both a mode of production and a social system. Marx's critique of capitalism centred particularly on its laissez-faire, nineteenth century manifestation, a version that anticipates neo-liberalism a century later. While, in practice, 'actually existing socialism' (popularly known as communism) did not dispense entirely with the market mechanism, it did subjugate it to state planning systems and a socialized, if threadbare, approach to employment and welfare. Labour markets existed, but

geographical mobility of labour was sometimes frustrated by authoritarian restrictions on movement, while the low availability of consumer goods on the open market reduced the efficacy of wage incentives. Soviet socialist countries also formed their own Comecon trading bloc, largely isolated from global capitalist competition, notwithstanding substantial variations between countries. The result seems to have been an employment relationship, which, though authoritarian and poorly rewarded by western standards, was stable, ensured high levels of employment (for men and women) and associated social welfare provisions, in effect a form of state paternalism. Since 1989, this approach no longer figures as a serious alternative in European societies. It has, however, left its mark on the countries that have passed through it, particularly where they have made a rapid and, for many, traumatic transition to neo-liberalism, notably, when stable lifetime employment and the associated social wage have been lost. In some cases, this has also been accompanied by major changes in gender relations.

The principle alternative to neo-liberalism today is some variant of social market economy (to use this term more broadly than its customary application to West Germany). In this view, the point is not to replace capitalism with an alternative social and employment system; but to regulate the market so that it takes account of social factors. 'Relationship capitalism' (Hutton, 1995) has, and, can take, several forms, according to which social institutions assume the central role in regulating the market. This might be done mainly at arms-length, as with the British voluntarist system of industrial relations before 1979, or by direct state prescription as with French *comités d'entreprise* and works council systems, or by more actively empowering social actors in some version of social partnership. The social market approach, following Durkheim, recognizes that the employment relationship has both economic and social aspects. As such, it contains an ethical or moral element beyond just the honouring of the contract. The employer has a duty of care, and rights and responsibilities exist on both sides, justifying the use of terms like trust, loyalty and commitment. In short, this is a long-term human relationship, not unlike those in the family field. As Richard Sennett (1998) argues, fragmented short-term capitalism may not only undermine the family in material terms, but also corrode the social habits that underpin it. This may even happen in a society, such as the United Kingdom or USA, which is highly prosperous in aggregate utilitarian terms. Stakeholding offers the most comprehensive and enduring alternative to the market and shareholder model. It also dovetails with industrial relations pluralism (Ackers 2002). This approach qualifies property rights by setting them alongside the rights of other human subjects, such as employees, customers and members of the local community. Many employers use stakeholding rhetoric in a loose, misleading way, by suggesting that a harmony of interests exists between investors, employees and customers, even in the short term. A serious stakeholder model, however, demands organized interest groups and new forms of regulation. In the classic case of the German model, a network exists of state regulation, trade unions and works councils. Together, they curb the unfettered power of property.

Even within a neo-liberal state regime, large or small employers may voluntarily develop their own socialized version of the employment relationship. One instance would be a co-operative system, like Mondragon in Spain or the

local networks in Italy. Another could be small or medium-sized family firms, as in Germany. Welfare capitalism or paternalism occurs where employers themselves acknowledge their social responsibilities and the social nature of the employment relationship. On the economic side, this may be linked to a human resource management argument (also used at a societal level by social market regimes) that employee skills are the major source of competitive advantage. Hence, long-term investment through good wages and conditions, training, employee participation and welfare provision will create a high quality and productive labour force. Several problems arise with the voluntary model, whatever the blend of enlightened self-interest and charitable good will. First, it has always been a minority pursuit among employers, often as a union-avoidance strategy. Second, it is authoritarian and discretionary, treating the employee as a child without rights. Third, it appears to be in decline under the assault of short-term free market capitalism.

These concerns may appear far removed from problems in family life. However, if business is free to regard labour as a commodity, there may be strong material and social implications for family life. Over 90% of the working population in most European societies earn their living by working for someone else. This labour is not just an input into a business profit equation, but the principal means by which adults support themselves and their children, and retain their dignity and purpose as role models for the next generation. Several possible hypotheses or research questions arise from this characterization of the employment relationship. First, it provides an opportunity to compare and contrast the economic underpinning of national social policy. In particular, it provides a chance to set two decades of neo-liberal experiment in Britain (and the USA) against the social market experience of Germany and Scandinavia. While some convergence may have occurred in 'third way' thinking about the balance of regulation and market today, until the mid 1990s approaches were highly polarized. Another consideration might be whether rigid postwar employment regulation, predicated on a male breadwinner model, needs to be rethought in line with changes in family structure and female labour market participation.

Similar considerations may translate to the EU candidate countries from the former Soviet economic bloc. Dramatic changes over the past decade provide another test-bed for alternative approaches to regulating the employment relationship and the implications for family life. As we have seen, under communism, the employment relationship was highly socialized, with only a limited application of labour market mechanisms, although this went further in Hungary and Yugoslavia. It offered low real wages and poor productivity, but high employment stability and substantial social benefits delivered in kind, such as trade union holiday provisions; or what the Chinese termed 'the iron rice bowl'. In common with western paternalism, this was a unitarist system at the company level, without effective independent trade unions. In some cases, as with Poland's Solidarity, free unions developed as a central part of the challenge to communist power. In most others, trade unions were largely or partially discredited as transmission belts for the Communist Party. As a result, the dismantling of the communist employment relationship appears to have followed an exceptionally rapid neo-liberal route. In these cases, scope can be found to analyse the impact of this change on families in

general and on gender roles in particular. In addition, comparisons can be made between countries like Poland, with an inheritance of independent unions, or those with a stronger prior experience of market mechanisms, such as Hungary, and the rest.

The European social model – in contrast to the Anglo-American neo-liberal model – appears to advocate a (diluted) version of social market thinking, whereby the state and employment institutions, such as employer and worker social partners and works committees, curb market behaviour (Bach and Sisson, 2000, pp. 34–6). This can be rationalized both as necessary social protection for vulnerable groups, but also as being more conducive to long-term investment in the human resources necessary for the relatively high-wage, high-productivity, high-skill knowledge economy that Europe aspires to. Any evidence, therefore, that the European social market has supported successful family life and the reproduction of a high-quality labour force to a greater extent than the neo-liberal alternative, would be of interest, or *vice versa*. Equally, ways in which the social market could be modernized to meet new challenges, such as labour flexibility and increased female labour market participation, would be relevant.

A number of different approaches can be envisaged to the ways in which the employment relationship shapes family life. High levels of job insecurity and spatial mobility may undermine the development of long-term relationships and the stability of family life, with regard to partners, children and older relatives. This may, in the long run, pass greater external costs onto the state welfare system. High levels of employment insecurity and long hours (see below), particularly in early career, may delay family formation and lead to lower reproductive rates, coupled with inadequate family income at the bottom end of the labour market.

The decline of more egalitarian social models – and of long-term, semi-skilled, relatively well-paid, manual employment – may polarize employment and family income into ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, creating major problems of social exclusion. Deregulated employment could lead to very long individual and joint parental working hours, or what Amitai Etzioni (1995) has referred to as the ‘parenting deficit’ at both ends of the labour market. Increased female employment, with no downward adjustment in men’s working hours, will increase the total average family time devoted to paid employment to the detriment of other ‘social’ work (supporting children and older relatives). Hence the development in effect of a ‘double-male-breadwinner’ household – as opposed to the ‘two-halves’ households that some feminists have long advocated (Coote, 1981).

On the other hand, a rigid stakeholder model, centred on male full-time employment, may deny women access to the labour market and men to childcare, compared to the work–life packages they would be able to construct in a more flexible system. Equally, individual families, according to their personal inclinations and skill mixes, may want the freedom to strike contrasting work–life solutions. The other face of ‘job-rich’, time-poor, affluent families may be ‘job-poor’ families on low incomes, or the concentration of low-paid childcare among working class women, at the expense of their own children.

Dramatic, unplanned changes in the labour force, for example the collapse of male manufacturing work, may disrupt customary gender roles,

create psychological and economic difficulties in families and lead to relationship breakdown. Young working-class men may become longer-term casualties, as a result of the loss of male employment role models and routes, low education attainment by boys and the emergence of a feminized service economy.

Given the crucial impact that wages and conditions have on family life, employment regulation may be more important than targeted welfare measures to support families, as for example the impact of the new National Minimum Wage in the UK on the family resources of part-time women workers. This is doubly true if European states are intent on reducing welfare budgets.

Other possible connections arise. Information technology and home working may enable some families to balance work and family life more effectively. Alternatively, it may lead to a further intrusion of paid employment into family life. 'High commitment' organizations may be moving from discriminating against women *per se* to discriminating in promotion against both men and women with outside family commitments. Tensions may arise between equal opportunity policies, targeted at individuals, and family-friendly policies.

Finally, two reasons explain why the employment dimension of family policy requires major consideration. First, while the social impact on family formation is, to a large extent, a product of personal choice, the economic impact is usually the unintended, indirect consequence of employer policy. If, for instance, citizens are freely choosing to delay family formation, have fewer or no children or form more short-term relationships, it is hard to countenance interference by a liberal democratic state to change the situation. For this reason, it is unlikely that European states will ever intervene directly to readjust the family division of labour between men and women. If, by contrast, couples would like to form families earlier, have more children, spend more time with them and establish long-term partnerships, but employment conditions prevent them from doing so, a strong case can be made for public state regulation (Ackers, 2001, 2002). State intervention may arise from both human rights considerations and from the wider economic and social needs of society.

In addition, the EU has the power to regulate directly European-wide employment policy, in a way it cannot do for family policy. Moreover, while domestic family roles are widely regarded as a private matter, the division of labour at work falls within the public policy arena. In reconciling paid work and family life, the employment end of the equation is most susceptible to public policy interventions, especially at EU level. Through indirect employment levers, such as the working time directive, European works councils and maternity and paternity provisions, the EU may spread the social market model of regulated capitalism with potentially profound consequences for the quality of family life. Another interesting comparison here would be in the implementation of the working time directive across the community and, in particular, the contrast between the impact on families of the lax British 48-hour working week and the apparently tight French 35-hour week. In sum, the employment relationship not only shapes family life, but also furnishes an established arena of institutions and agencies for further state intervention.

The papers in this collection illustrate these general points. As Devi Sacchetto demonstrates, Italy has developed one of the most fragmented

employment structures of the industrialized countries, with a very high proportion of self-employment. Over recent years, and in line with global economic change, we can observe the emergence of a new kind of labour contract, associated with flexibility, adding a new uncertainty to the employment relationship. Sacchetto argues that these new contracts also change relationships inside the family. As a result, the family looks more and more like an economic unit, with a kind of limited instrumental rationality that seeks opportunities in the short term. Meanwhile, state employment policies focus increasingly on the idea of employability, linked to forms of workfare, that only sustain people in work or looking for a job. The main argument here is that these changes in Italian employment and employment policy could also bring about a more 'economic' attitude to relationships inside the family.

Spain has undergone – belatedly in comparison to other EU countries – many of the changes in women's social participation that have contributed to the extensive modification of family patterns. Monica Badia argues that, in the earlier social model, households were almost exclusively defined in terms of the presence of a male breadwinner, and women were mostly dedicated to social reproduction. This social arrangement was framed within a broader political context that emphasized family stability. However, in recent years several factors have combined to generate a far more heterogeneous social model, in which the gender division of labour is very different from the earlier model. Despite the fact that the family model has changed – with shifts toward households structures based on two breadwinners and single breadwinners with caring responsibilities – and in spite of recent legislative innovations in family policy, the Spanish welfare state does little to help parents to combine work and household life. This paper addresses the difficulties of families in making employment compatible with raising children and their strategies for controlling familial burdens. The discussion provides insights into the type of legislation that would make it easier for families to balance paid work and family life.

Kait Kabun's paper explores women's changing role in paid work and the family as Estonia makes the transition from Soviet-style socialism to Western capitalism, and prepares to join the EU. It charts interlinkages between women's employment and family life as an emergent area of public policy concern in Estonia. Work-home balance is not yet a very 'live' practice in Estonia, the paper argues. A few good surveys but not enough policy impact assessments have been carried out. An overview is given of the main trends in women's options on the labour market during the 1990s (referred to as 'post-socialist Estonia'). The paper considers the main findings from the available social science surveys and discusses the reasons for the relative shortage of public interventions as well as unwillingness from the employers' side to deal with the reconciliation issue more actively.

British employment policies have changed quite significantly since the election of New Labour in 1997, following 18 years of strongly neo-liberal Conservative employment policy, including rejection of the EU social chapter. In his paper, Peter Ackers maintains that, although Labour is often perceived in continental Europe as committed to flexible labour markets, by the benchmark of what had gone before, the current government has substantially increased employment regulation. It has done so, both of its own initiative and by signing

up to the EU social chapter. Policies on the national minimum wage, statutory union recognition, working time and parental leave have changed the legal and institutional framework of British employment relations. They have also helped to shape employer and trade union initiatives in the direction of social partnership and family-friendly policies. This paper focuses on one dimension of this change in policy and political mood: the debate surrounding the government policy proposal, *Work and Parents: competitiveness and choice*. A *Green Paper* (2000), the first major initiative of its kind in the UK.

Elizabeth Such is more sceptical of New Labour's record. Her study of dual-earner families in the UK, traces the emergence of this employment grouping and the belated policy response. She argues that Labour's response is constrained by the postwar UK view of the family as a private matter. Using interview material from male and female dual earners, Such illuminates the difficulties that working women, in particular, experience in reconciling work and family responsibilities. She concludes that, though Labour has brought childcare and parental leave back onto the policy agenda, the lingering conception of the family as a private affair has restricted its provisions to minimum levels.

Roberta Guerrina's concluding paper provides an overview of EU family-friendly policies and assesses the assumptions the Commission makes about family structures, gender roles and the employment relationship. The key question addressed is: are we witnessing the emergence of a new employment model in Europe, or is the relationship converging towards an established model? This tests Gerda Falkner's hypothesis about the development of a corporatist community. First, the paper discusses the aims of European integration and the debates about the introduction of family policies at this level. Second, it provides an overview of the main EU policies, including parental leave and maternity rights, the working time directive and childcare recommendations. Third, it considers employment policies that have a direct impact on the family-employment nexus, notably European works councils. Finally, in response to the question about an emerging European employment model and its main features she refers to the role of the social partners and the balance of hard versus soft laws, as well as any emerging links between employment policies, gender roles and family structures.

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## 2. Work and Family Flexibility: an Interpretation of Italian Transformation

*Devi Sacchetto*

Italy has one of the most fragmented production systems among industrialized nations, characterized by clearly differentiated productive units and a high proportion of the workforce in formal self-employment. In the 1990s, the increasing globalization of production, combined with stronger migratory flows and a rise in the number of women in the labour force contributed to more varied contractual arrangements being adopted. In addition, governments became interested in linking the underdeveloped Italian welfare system to availability for work by institutionalizing the notion of employability. This article is concerned with the effect these changes have had on relationships within families, especially from an economic and utilitarian perspective. In a system where flexibility is constrained by rigid working hours and an overly normative social system, family members are increasingly pursuing more flexible living arrangements, which give rise to stress and tension as they attempt to juggle their many commitments.

The growth in the number of productive units based on small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as an increase in the proportion of self-employed workers is the result of a twofold process, which began in the 1970s. The process stems, firstly, from the decentralization of production, which was led by large companies, based on the assumption that concentration without centralization would reduce the level of industrial conflict (Blim, 1990). Secondly, it was associated with the attempt by workers to escape from degrading working conditions on the assembly line (Bologna and Fumagalli, 1997). By the 1990s, the shift towards self-employment was, however, slowing down in Italy: the proportion of the labour force working for an employer rose from 68% in 1990 to 75% in 2000, bringing the situation in Italy closer to that in other EU member states, where wage-earners make up 83% of the total workforce (Censis, 2002).

The Italian labour market has always been regarded as rigid. The lack of flexibility is used to explain the high level of unemployment. In the 1990s, young people, women and the population living in the south of Italy were most prone to unemployment. Italian governments have tried to introduce different kinds of formal contractual arrangements in an attempt to make jobs more flexible and, thereby, reduce unemployment. Self-employment has also been regulated to bring it into line with waged work by introducing the same kind of flexibility. Greater individualization of work contracts together with shared managerial targets, improved pay and worker participation in company profits are being developed to make working conditions more rewarding.

The extension of the concept of flexibility appears to be linked not only to the new role women play in the world of work (Sennett, 1999, p. 56), but also to managerial needs for greater efficiency in business operations. A distinction is often made here between numerical and functional flexibility (Reyneri, 1966, pp. 254–6). Numerical flexibility concerns the normative and contractual agreements that regulate hiring and firing, working hours and outsourcing of

production. Functional flexibility is concerned with the distribution of tasks and subcontracting of services. Employers in Italy have been granted a wider range of discretionary powers. For government, trade unions and employers, flexible working hours are considered as a means of combating unemployment, rather than as an instrument to reconcile family responsibilities with paid work. For workers such measures have created uncertainty and the fear of losing acquired rights.

### **Family and individual choices**

In common with its European neighbours, Italy underwent a number of far-reaching socio-demographic changes during the last two decades of the twentieth century. The birth rate fell to one of the lowest levels in the world. Women have postponed the birth of their first child to a much older age, marriage has become increasingly unstable, and the population is ageing rapidly. Children are remaining longer in the parents' homes. More people are achieving higher levels of educational qualifications, and more women are working outside the home.

These changes are giving rise to debates about family life and family policies, which reveal widely differing attitudes and opinions. For the political and economic elites, marriage and waged work remain the two anchors for society and underpin policy thinking. Family policy measures are subject to marked variations not only between northern and southern Italy but also between social categories. In some cases, public policy is limited to support for low-income families, leaving little room for the development of social services, except for education and health (Saraceno, 1997). The family is commonly seen as a place where people give vent to the tensions that build up in the outside world through exposure to economic and cultural change that has substantially reduced individual choice (Trifiletti, 1999). In this context, family policies are perceived as a form of protectionism, stripped of their universal functions and confined to specific situations. The scope people have for controlling their own lives is constrained because public policy has not taken account of the impact of socio-demographic change on families (Barbagli and Saraceno, 1977, p. 22). Despite persistent differences in living arrangements between north and south or between the urban and rural environments, the process of secularization has affected the whole population, thereby intensifying the need for more state intervention.

While public provision has become increasingly targeted, the trend towards individualization and democratization of family life (Beck, 2000) has extended the options available for families. In Italy, these choices are strongly opposed by institutional traditionalism. As a result individuals are struggling to give meaning to their lives. Since the 1980s, families have been treated as economic and benefit units, as indicated by the fact that reference is made to family income rather than family consumption as a criterion for access to social benefits and services (Saraceno, 1997, p. 309). Furthermore, for policy makers the couple must be legally married; unmarried cohabiting couples do not have the right to tax deductions and benefits such as widow's pensions or tax concessions on inheritance. The lack of universal rights to social services and, more broadly, of access to full citizenship rights, is leading to fraudulent

practices, as individuals attempt to recoup social security contributions, and firms try to reduce productive costs.

In addition to income, the nature of a person's job determines their access to social services, discriminating in favour of those who work full time for an employer. The rapid changes in family size and structure and the nature of a person's job have undermined the impact of family policy, which is too rigid and applies to normative living arrangements that are becoming less widespread. Inequalities are, therefore, intensifying as vulnerable groups are left to fend for themselves.

The research carried out within the framework of the IPROSEC project has highlighted the impact of the economic recession and poor social provision on the development of ideal family size. Marriage and procreation should be moments of free expression, but childbearing is found to depend on economic stability. Low wages and inadequate family allowances strongly influence choice. Children, rather than marriage, play a very important and normative role in the life of a couple, to such an extent that procreation is a moment of renegotiation for couples. The birth of the first child often gives rise to conflicts between partners: the woman refuses to take on the additional workload, or does not consider it to be only her duty, particularly when she has a job outside home. The man has to come to terms with new forms of fatherhood that have a social, economic and cultural value. Younger couples are gradually adopting a pattern of fatherhood where fathers participate in the care and education of their children.

Having children involves assuming responsibility, devoting time to their care and making an economic commitment. For this reason, childbirth is often postponed until couples have achieved economic stability. In Italy, surveys indicate that the number of children couples want is greater than the number they have for economic reasons, whereas, in Germany and Sweden, fertility and employment appear to be influenced by the availability of places in nursery schools (Del Boca, 2000, pp. 56–7).

Motherhood is not experienced as a life choice that is incompatible with paid work outside the home in Italy (Trifiletti, 1977, p. 211), but women in employment are less inclined to have children, as in other Mediterranean states (Blangiardo, 2001, p. 125). More women than men are self-employed, or have non-standard work contracts, which enables them to adapt their working patterns when they have children. The allowance women are entitled to receive during maternity leave serves as a replacement wage rather than helping to cover childcare costs. Unemployed women do not receive maternity pay.

For most women, having children limits job opportunities and employment careers. Higher income families are less affected since they can afford to pay for a maid or childminder. Women are also more likely to change jobs to accommodate family needs, often sacrificing their professional careers, whereas men's choices, particularly those of older men, are not affected by the birth of children or the need to care for older people and, more generally, by family events. Men rarely leave a high-skilled job when they marry or have children since their jobs are more secure and prestigious. Women are more likely to give up their less secure and less well-paid jobs when they marry or have their first child, both because it is easier to find this type of job and because the contribution to family income is, in any case, relatively small.

In general, employment policy is not formulated with regard to social policies designed to support people in casual and insecure work, thereby increasing the degree of uncertainty not only in their working lives but also outside work. Existing provision is intended primarily to meet the needs of people in work, or who have worked in the past and have already formed a family. It excludes those who do not fit into these categories (Gesano and Heins, 1994, pp. 230–1). This rigidity results in a low level of public service provision, making it difficult for women to become economically active and to have children. For example, a Milanese couple of working parents with a total yearly income of 16,550 euros cannot afford to send their eight-month-old twin daughters to nursery school. Because the mother has a non-standard work contract, she is not considered to have a 'continuous commitment' to employment and is not, therefore, entitled to a nursery school place. By contrast, mothers who have full-time jobs and are employees are entitled to a place, irrespective of the level of their income (Sottile, 2002). The paradox is that, if both parents have an income, they are no longer eligible for subsidized services, whereas many families cannot send their children to nursery schools because the mother does not have continuous employment, which she would have if the children went to nursery school.

### **Paid and unpaid work in families**

In Italy, the most common family type is where both members of the couple work outside the home. Dual-earner families are, however, more widespread in the north and centre of Italy, while in the south there are more families with not even one income. Among younger people, female economic activity rates are very similar to those of men, even if unemployment affects women more than men. A few decades ago, high female unemployment rates would have discouraged women from remaining in the labour market. Nowadays, women seem more inclined to accept unemployment and are prepared to take temporary jobs or informal work. By 2001, more than 8 million women were in the labour force in Italy. The number had increased by a million in seven years. Female employment had risen from 35.4 to 41.1% over the same period, while 13% of women were unemployed compared to 7.3% of men (Veneto Lavoro, 2002, pp. 34–5).

Studies of women's involvement in labour market activity can be divided into two groups (Pristinger, 1992). The first stresses the continuing growth of women's participation in recent years; the second, which takes into consideration a longer period of time, emphasizes the persistent imbalance in the sexual division of labour as well as gender inequality in the occupational structure. This section of the paper presents recent trends and sets them in a historical perspective.

For many years, families in Italy have acted as a cushion protecting their members from economic pressures, to the extent that the family has become a substitute for public policy. Economic restructuring since the 1980s, which resulted in male redundancies, created new problems since women were starting to play a more active role in the world of work. The voluntary double burden (Balbo, 1978) of women (in paid and unpaid work) reflects an attempt to build and express a complex identity. The low social recognition of women's

work, which is still associated with female jobs, is increasingly intertwined with the basic economic needs of families. In particular, in the northern and central regions of Italy, both parents are forced to undertake paid work due to the high cost of living, the need to maintain their level of consumption and low wages. The choice of being employed under the same conditions as men may result in a decline in the number of births to avoid an excessive burden, thereby reducing family size (Trifiletti, 1997, p. 209).

In the south of Italy, the large number of young people registering as unemployed could be considered as an indication of the refusal by women to withdraw from the labour market to become housewives and of their realization that it is not possible to combine paid and unpaid work. But the process is not so linear as it appears. Embedded within it are far-reaching cultural and emancipatory changes. Compared to other EU member states, the sharing of paid and family work was far from being part of everyday life in the 1990s in Italy (Bimbi, 1996). Women are particularly affected by flexible employment contracts when they choose, or are forced to choose, jobs that require less rigid working hours but, at the same time, offer less security. Middle-class families are able to employ a maid if the wife has a job outside the home, enabling women to devote more time to paid work and limiting tensions with the family. Men usually adapt their work commitments if their wives also work outside the home, but, even then, the main responsibility for the family and domestic tasks rests with women, irrespective of whether or not they are employed. Women in paid work are found to have less free time and less time to devote to family care (Saraceno, 1998), but they still spend more time seeing to the basic needs of the family than to housework. A survey carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in the late 1980s and early 1990s showed that, if a woman had a waged job, she worked one month more than a man in a year, particularly when the couple was legally married (Istat, 1993).

In Italy, as elsewhere, an employee in public administration enjoys more protection and security than a worker in the private sector. Jobs in public administration are considered to come closest to meeting the needs of mothers and of families, because flexibility is to the mutual advantage of both employers and employees. Public sector jobs are, however, taking on some of the characteristic of private sector employment, thereby reducing the differences between the two types of organization (Censis, 2002). In the public sector, flexibility in working hours allows families to manage everyday life more effectively. Jobs in a public or state administration facilitate the reconciliation of paid and unpaid working time, because people spend less time in paid work, working hours are more flexible, and it is easier to obtain leave or part-time jobs. At a training course organized by the town council of Venice for a group of female employees, work flexibility was found to be high: the women felt they had personal control over their working time, except when the workload was particularly heavy. Their job satisfaction was directly related to the kind of job they had: women in medium to high positions felt more self-fulfilled. All the women noted, however, that household labour was not fairly distributed.

By contrast, in the private sector, flexibility means a general increase in the monetary value attributed to time and, consequently, in the amount of time devoted to economic activity. Increasing international competition and the weakening of the role played by trade unions have resulted in longer working

hours in response to constraints on wage increases. For employers, working hours are arranged to meet the needs of a 'just in time' productive system. Particularly in large companies, employers are much less flexible. They guarantee basic rights but do not offer flexible working arrangements to suit the needs of their employees. In smaller firms, the family environment can provide greater flexibility in working hours, but it is more difficult to take leave for family reasons because every individual is indispensable. Employer-controlled flexibility impacts on the lifestyle choices of employees to a much greater extent than family policies.

### **Young people and family incomes**

Economic differences between the centre-north and south of Italy have increased, accentuating disparities both in the labour market and in the home. Differences in the cost of living between north and south are, for example, very marked. In the south, high levels of youth and female unemployment combine with relatively poor provision of social protection and the absence of a market-oriented culture. The everyday lives of families, remaining closer to the male breadwinner model, are, however, less stressful and more stable than in the north, where it is essential for every member of the family to have a job. Here schedules are usually more frenetic, and people are obsessed with self-enrichment, which is often translated into high levels of consumption, reducing the time available for social interaction between family members.

The characteristics of family income in Italy are very different from those in other EU member states. In 1996, the contribution to household incomes from wages and salaries was below the EU average (46.4% compared to 50.4%), while a high proportion of income was derived from self-employment (12.4% compared to the EU average of 8%). Italy had the lowest contribution to income from social benefits and allowances (3% compared to an EU average of 9% and 19% in Finland), counterbalanced by the highest proportion among the EU member states of income from pensions (34% compared to an average of 29.3%) (Istat, 2001). These factors may help to explain why income inequalities are particularly marked within Italy (Brandolini and D'Alessio, 2000, p. 308). In the first half of the 1990s, family income rose by 23%, but this only served to accentuate inequalities because income from work decreased, while capital and transfer incomes increased (Ferrucci, 1998, p. 51).

In Italy, families play an important role in redistributing income. The transfer of wealth accumulated within families is equivalent to 26% of the total wealth of families, which may have a positive effect on both working patterns and the birth rate (Tanda and Del Boca, 2000), since these transfers take place almost exclusively between parents and children, particularly when the parents are still alive. Beneficiaries of such payments are typically well-educated people, those working in agriculture and residents in the south of Italy (Del Boca, 1997; Leonini, 1997). For this reason, social structure still has an important impact on individual life chances: schooling cannot compensate for the differences that result from family origins, and the parents' status tends to reproduce itself in children's opportunities to achieve at school (Sgritta 2002, p. 21).

In recent years, researchers have focused their attention on the fact that children leave their parents' home at a later age. The behaviour of young Italians varies markedly when they are aged between 20 and 30, whereas in the preceding and subsequent age groups, their behaviour is more uniform (Sgritta, 2002). Different reasons can be cited for these variations, including the structure of the welfare system, the problems of finding housing at an affordable price, the way the university system works (limited numbers of scholarships that are unfairly distributed), the state of the economy and the tendency to define families as economic and moral units. Instead of gaining independence outside the family, young Italian adults become independent within the family (Sgritta, 2002, p. 34).

One of the most important factors determining behaviour in Italy, as compared to other EU member states, is the process whereby young people find their first job, which affects the whole of their employment career (Cobalti, 1993, p. 67). This is another reason why young adults remain longer with their families: they are respecting a set of basic conventions but, at the same time, they enjoy a certain degree of independence while waiting to find a permanent job. Families thus function as a social shock absorber for children. On the one hand, parents help to maintain their offspring while they are looking for a proper job; on the other, they provide a relational network through which to find a job. According to a survey carried out by the Bank of Italy, more than 50% of jobs are obtained thanks to a family network (Del Boca, 2000).

Young people have considerably improved their level of educational attainment. They are living up to their family's expectations and bringing them a return on their investment, which is concentrated on only a small number of children. Job offers do not always match the characteristics of new recruits. More and more qualifiers are taking jobs that do not correspond to their aspirations. According to a recent survey, more than one million young people aged 18 or under had gained experience of work (Alisei, 2002). After qualifying, those living in the north of Italy found jobs that were not appropriate for their qualifications. They preferred to take a well-paid job without considering the costs in terms of rights and social protection.

Nowadays in Italy, the job market tends to prolong the training period so that young people leave their parents' homes at a later age. This is due, primarily, to economic difficulties but it is also explained by problems in finding a permanent job with a suitable salary. Apprenticeships and training contracts are available for young people, but employers have used them to justify paying low wages and to extend probationary periods. If young people are entering the labour market at a later age, this is due less to the contractual arrangements they are offered than to their perception of the lack of job security. When the characteristics of the Italian social protection system are taken into account, with its emphasis on nuclear families with dependent children at risk and in conditions of extreme poverty, it is easy to understand why a large proportion of young people prefer to remain in their parents' homes where they feel safe from external threats. This slow process of independence from their parents can be explained in terms of a cost and benefit analysis. They are making a rational choice, which is the consequence of changes in the relationships within families. The authoritarian model has been abandoned in favour of a more accommodating arrangement. The new model combines a moderate level of

control on the part of the parents with real independence for their offspring. Parents experience the departure of their children as a loss, the end of their protective role and authority in which they had invested a considerable amount of their own energy.

### **The family as an industrial process**

The Italian family's capacity to adapt to different situations seems to be in a state of crisis in recent years as more individualistic attitudes have developed, and less attention is given to family responsibilities. It is as if the family's reserves, which were thought to be an inexhaustible 'natural' resource had been used up, causing deep rifts in society that cannot be explained either at generational or formal level, but have to be seen as a component of the changing relationship within couples and as a manifestation of the choices made informally within families. The more enduring relationships are those that are the outcome of an uninterrupted processes of readjustment and redefinition of mutual expectations (Barbagli and Saraceno, 1997, p. 20).

Smaller family size does not mean less time is being devoted to family commitments, since parents are investing more heavily in their children. Women entering paid work outside the home are carrying a double burden, since family care and housework have not been redistributed between family members. The rigidity of family life in terms of economic needs and care duties can be compared to that of the employment relationship, which demands total availability of workers while introducing increasingly differentiated time schedules and working arrangements.

Within families, the value attributed to the work done by family members is variable, depending on whether it commands regular or irregular wages, whether its is seen as a male or female job, and whether it entails fixed or flexible working hours. Family life is being treated as an industrial process, where occupational paths are conceptualized as discrete units. Hedonism is of primary importance, and the aim is to optimize the use of time over the life course. The family is the nexus for productive and reproductive work, and is expected to adapt rapidly to the changing roles it assumes. The family thus reproduces the rationality found in both work organization and the most intimate relationships. The functions of parents are shifting from formative to more organizational aspects. These far-reaching changes, though more marked in the north and centre of Italy, are also affecting the south, especially the towns and areas where the economy is most developed.

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### 3. Combining Employment and Family Life in Spain

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In comparison to other EU member states, Spain has belatedly undergone many of the changes in women's social participation that contribute to the extensive modification of family life. In the earlier social model, households were almost exclusively defined in terms of the presence of a male breadwinner, and women devoted themselves primarily to social reproduction. This arrangement was framed within a broader political context that emphasized family stability. However, in recent years several factors have combined to generate a far less homogenous social model, in which the gender division of labour is very different from that of the earlier model. Despite the shift toward household structures based on two breadwinners and single breadwinners with caring responsibilities, and in spite of recent legislative innovations in family policy, the Spanish welfare state does little to help parents combine work and family life.

This paper addresses the difficulties families have in making employment compatible with raising children and explores their strategies for managing family responsibilities. It shows how public policy has failed to provide families with the support they need if they are to balance paid work and family life.

#### **The family–state relationship**

The Spanish welfare state relies on the family as a strong provider of social protection. According to Miguel Laparra and Manuel Aguilar (1997), solidarity networks within kinship groups have the function of redistributing income from different sources within the family, thereby preventing widespread social exclusion. Family solidarity networks help to explain how Spanish society has been able to adjust relatively successfully to the impact of increasing unemployment and job instability, at least in comparison with its north European neighbours. Immaculada Cebrián and Juan Francisco Jimeno (1998) demonstrate that the flows into and out of employment and labour market activity of individuals who are secondary income earners within the family are determined not only by age and level of education, but also by the family situation, including the employment status and income of the head of household, family income from benefits and the presence of young children in the family.

Certain features can be identified that are characteristic of family structures in southern Europe, including: a high degree of intergenerational cohabitation; patronage networks that serve to get family members into the labour market; strongly institutionalized marriage; a low female employment rate in the formal labour market; and widespread family and child-oriented attitudes (Pérez-Díaz *et al.*, 1998). Such a family structure favours income diversity. Many Spanish families receive multiple incomes (Durán, 1997). Typically, an adult male breadwinner usually earns a primary income. In addition, a smaller and usually unstable secondary income (often earned by the wife or by children in their late teens or twenties who still live in the parental

home) comes from part-time or short-term jobs and the unemployment benefit associated with such jobs. To this should be added the grandparents' pensions. Even if pensions, unemployment benefit or wages are low, they may still add up to an acceptable family income, redistributed in favour of the unemployed, marginally employed and those who live away from home but do not earn enough to support themselves.

At the same time, this redistribution of income within the family entails sacrifices in terms of opportunities for individual family members, which sometimes generates family conflicts and psychological tensions that erode family unity. Most of these tensions, and the social and personal costs they imply, are borne by women. Women carry out most of the care activities and unpaid social reproduction work that help families to cope with income shortages resulting from unemployment, job instability or retirement (Carrasco *et al.*, 1997). A major trend noted in Spain, as in other countries, is the extension of 'youth' due to longer periods spent in education, problems in finding a first job, lack of income and consequently of housing. All these factors are increasing the dependency of young people on their parents, creating additional demands on women's time.

In Spain, democratization has slowly eroded the Church's influence, with the concomitant dissemination of alternative living arrangements. The legalization of contraceptives, abortion and divorce has further transformed living patterns. At the same time, marriage is being postponed as a consequence of high youth unemployment rates, increasingly unstable employment for young people and the extension of higher education. Other aggravating factors are housing shortages, the rising cost of housing, and cultural shifts in attitudes towards pre-marital sexual relations. The postponement of marriage has indirectly influenced the birth rate, delaying and reducing the number of births. In 2000, Spain recorded the lowest fertility rate in the European Union (Eurostat, 2001). The fall in the birth rate is also attributed to the rapid growth in participation of Spanish women in the workforce since the 1980s. Although employment rates for Spanish women are still well below the EU average, women of childbearing age have entered employment in large numbers over the period. This phenomenon occurred so quickly that social services, family policy, labour legislation and social norms inside the family have been unable to keep pace.

One married female respondent working reduced hours in the public sector and with three children explained why she thought people wanted fewer children:

*I'm the mother of a large family with three small children: the oldest of them is 16 months, and the youngest are twins aged 7 months. I want to explain my case so they can see how hard it is to have children today. We have to juggle a thousand things around just to get to the end of the month. ... When you think that, just on milk and nappies, we have to spend a lot of money. Babysitters' fees make our budget crazy. The same for crèches, where, apart from anything else, there are unending waiting lists for both public and private ones. And that's not even counting medical expenses, vaccinations, baby clothes, and other clothes. All that times three. They keep growing and using things up. And I keep on working and trying to bring them up, and with a reduced workday so I can be with them. Believe me, it takes effort. It can't be compared with other European families. The*

*help available today is insufficient and ridiculous compared with that offered by other European governments. Most of our friends have opted not to have any kids, or to have only one. So there's a low birth rate in Spain. What? Are they surprised?*

Improvements in the economic situation and the provision of facilities to help balance paid work and family life are considered by respondents interviewed for the IPROSEC project as the factors most likely to encourage parents to have more children. Spain has a poor record in public policies designed to help women to combine their family and professional responsibilities. The Spanish welfare state does little to facilitate the integration of women into the workforce, as it is heavily transfer-oriented and offers very few social services (Sánchez and Gómez 1998). For example, the public provision of childcare is very poor, and national childcare policies are exclusively educational. Pre-school services are not conceived by policy makers as gender equality programmes aimed at promoting the participation of mothers in the labour market, but rather as educational programmes for the benefit of minors, especially those who come from less privileged families (Valiente, 1996). In general, the problems of combining labour market and domestic work and organizing household chores and leisure are not being addressed directly by policy makers. In addition to the problem of insufficient childcare or pre-school places, school hours are wholly incompatible with employment.

Incompatibility between motherhood and work outside the home in today's society is one of the main problems facing all families during the reproductive period. As one married female respondent, a housewife with three children, recounted:

*It seems like school and parents' employment work against each other. Companies are not overly willing to have mothers taking care of their kids. I don't think the state does much to try to reconcile the school timetable and people's working hours. Maybe it would be easier if children started school at 8.30 in the morning instead of 9, and instead of being let out at 12, if they finished at 1.30. The present timetable not only makes it hard to work, it also makes it hard to go shopping for food or do other chores. And then they're at home from 12 to 3, bored and doing nothing. So nothing changes. ... You get home at 3.30 from leaving the kids at school, and you have to get ready again at 4.30 to go and collect them. Plus, these are times when most shops are closed. It's a good thing that at least some supermarkets stay open at midday. Also, I think it's bad that banks are only open in the morning. That way, you can't get anything done in the afternoon, and you are obliged to do everything through the ATM machine. At least they could open at weekends.*

A recurring theme among the interviewees was the problem of fitting in working hours with school hours, and this is an area where it was generally believed the state should do more as explained by a lone mother working part time as a home helper:

*We complain today because a lot of kids end up with nothing to do really early in the day, like 12 or 1 o'clock in the afternoon, and no one seems to know exactly what's to be done with them, so they plonk them down in front of the television. This requires full-time commitment to children, or hiring private help, but that is very expensive and most people can't afford it. After all those years of intensive work as a mother, re-incorporation into working life may be difficult, that is if it*

*ever really takes place properly. Why doesn't the state solve this serious problem of short school or crèche hours?*

Another lone parent, receiving help from Caritas described the difficulties lone mothers have in finding a job and, at the same time, summarized the problem facing most parents:

*It's difficult when you have children and want to find a job you like and which suits your timetable. For example, I'm interested in working mornings because if I have a daughter then I want to bring her up and be with her. That's very important for me. The problem is that this is not provided for in social terms.*

A respondent working full time in the public sector and living in an unmarried cohabiting relationship felt sceptical about the lack of government interest in family issues:

*In January 1998 I started to work as a sales assistant in a company. I signed a provisional contract for three months, which they renewed for a further six months. In July I happily informed the company that I was pregnant and on October 19 my boss informed me that they would not be renewing my contract. A few days earlier the front pages of the newspapers had been talking about a European Union directive that 'protects' pregnant women. ... What do we mean when we say that women nowadays are independent? If we are discriminated against at work, the medium that would allow us to be really independent, what independence are we talking about? I don't believe that politicians are even remotely interested in solving the low birth rate or the incompatibility between work and childcare. We should analyse whether Spanish society really 'envisages' the working woman with children: job instability, unscrupulous employers, commercial and administrative opening hours are incompatible with working hours.*

### **Family strategies to balance paid work and family life**

From the interviews, in addition to the widely recognized double shift worked by mothers, it is possible to distinguish four significant strategies that are applied to varying degrees and in different combinations. Strategy 1 concerns the choice of the size of the family unit. One of the most effective ways of coping with the demands of family life is to make professional and family needs compatible by reducing the size of the family unit. As stated by a male respondent working as a marketing director in the private sector and living in a reconstituted family:

*Since we had our child and my partner's maternity leave ran out, we just don't know what to do with our child. A public, free and quality crèche is ruled out, since while there are several in our town they're all full. The government seems to promote female employment but does nothing in the way of childcare facilities, obliging women to stay at home to look after the children, unless they wish to invest most of their wage on a private arrangement. This is not the way to boost the birth rate or to get women into the job world once and for all. We always wanted to have two children, but with the way things are we've decided that one is enough.*

A similar view was expressed by an unmarried cohabiting female respondent with a four-year-old daughter:

*I would not like my daughter to be an only child. I would like her to have brothers and sisters, but that is very complicated in practice. We have a small house, and if we have another child my parents will be too old to look after the baby while I'm at work. In this country bringing up children is like an obstacle race.*

Strategy 2 refers to the use of family solidarity, generally that of grandparents, to care for young children when neither parent is able to do so. Family solidarity usually comes into play when mothers work, but to a lesser degree, if the mother's educational level is higher, in which case, options usually include subcontracting tasks, by hiring domestic help. The problem of finding a place in a crèche was the factor determining the recourse to grandparents for a female respondent working part time as a nurse in the private sector:

*My parents take care of our baby. There are very few public crèches. There are few places, and long waiting lists. It works according to your income and a points system. If you live in the neighbourhood, you get a certain number of points. You need to have a very low income. Plus, there's a lot of immigration, and immigrant couples arrive and have kids straight away. They have low incomes and can get access to the public crèches, while families like ours just can't.*

The willingness to provide intergenerational support is, however, being questioned, as suggested by an older female respondent with a multigenerational household and working full time in the private sector:

*There's a real need to help these young parents in order for them not to be so dependent on the grandparents. When I become a grandmother, I'd like to take care of my grandchildren at weekends once in a while, or during holidays. But not as an obligation; I think I would feel trapped. I'd like to be able to relax when I retire.*

Another grandmother, who had raised her grandchild and did not go out to work, complained about the inadequacy of the support provided by the state:

*There should be more state aid, because if I wasn't there to look after them. ... Sometimes I feel really stressed. When my daughter-in-law had her baby she had maternity leave, but after that she had to give up work and brought me the baby every morning at 8 o'clock. I looked after him for more or less a month, but my daughter-in-law applied for leave of absence immediately. Such a small baby was too much for me. My daughter-in-law applied for unpaid leave of absence because she also remembered the case of the other grandmother (her mother). Her sister was separated with a baby and a 4-year-old son, and the grandmother worked and also took the children to school.*

One of the respondents, a doctor in a public hospital, who had had experience in treating middle-aged and elderly women, explained:

*The health of older women overburdened with responsibilities is affected. Grandmothers enjoy looking after their grandchildren, but will seldom admit that they are exhausted. Apart from the normal household work taken on by grandparents, they also help out in their own children's homes when they are unemployed. The fact that women bear the brunt of this type of work and that few can afford paid home help has led grandmothers to take on more responsibilities.*

Strategy 3 involves using services hired on the labour market, such as nannies (mostly female immigrants) or childcare services (crèche, day nurseries or pre-school provision). Only people with the highest incomes and educational levels, where the mother also works, can resort to these types of services, as

described by the same respondent himself living in a multigenerational reconstituted family: *'I have a girl from Colombia who lives with us and makes the meals and does the housework. She also looks after grandmother and keeps her company'*. The alternative to domestic help is to use services such as crèches or kindergartens when children are very small, and pre-schools for older children.

Strategy 4 involves redefining traditional familial roles. When women work, their partners may participate more in domestic tasks, especially those connected with caring for children. In one case, the strategy was determined by the schedule for the mother's job (private sector, long working day) and that of her ex-husband (public sector, eight-hour day). The father was responsible for collecting the child from school and caring for him during the afternoon as he explained:

*My ex-wife works 20 km from here, and me, 30 km. She's a physio, and works for a health insurance company from 9 to 2, and then in the afternoon she has a private rehabilitation clinic from 3 to 9 or 10 at night. My day as a university lecturer is more flexible, so I organize myself so I can be at home with our little guy in the afternoons.*

This case represents a new model in which the father assumes the principle role in childcare.

The problem of childcare is particularly acute for single mothers. One distinguishing feature of lone mothers in Spain is the high number of working women who find themselves in this situation. The lack of public policy to assist these working mothers who are raising their children alone is striking (Tobío and Fernández, 1999). In this case, support from the family network is vital, especially that provided by a grandmother. Family support increases when a marriage breaks down, making it possible for the woman to work or to compensate for a fall in economic resources. Again, paid domestic help is the traditional solution among the upper classes.

In addition to support from members of the extended family, bought-in help and participation by the ex-husband, other complementary strategies exist, which, on occasions, may be very important in making employment compatible with raising children. The most significant are those regarding time, space and the simplification of domestic chores. Time may be a constraining factor. In some cases, compatibility problems between work and home are reduced significantly when lone mothers leave a job with a fixed schedule and become self-employed with more flexible timetables, although this often means a financial sacrifice. The temporary break at the weekends when the children are with their father was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews. Part-time work is not seen as a solution since it means a large drop in income. Among spatial strategies is the option of living near family members, especially a grandmother. One female interviewee explained how she looked for a crèche for her daughter close to the grandmother's home, so that the grandmother would be able to collect her grand-daughter every day and look after her in her home in the afternoon. Another way of managing spatial distance is to work from home.

The simplifying of domestic chores can be achieved in two ways: increasing the use of appliances, and reducing expectations with regard to the

state of the home. The following quotation from a young lone mother working in domestic service illustrates this trend:

*There came a moment when I said enough is enough, I just couldn't cope, combining my job and the housework was a nightmare. I was over-stressed at home trying to do everything and got angry with my child for no reason at all. So now when I come home tired and don't feel up to doing the washing I just do it at the weekend. I admit that I am not as meticulous as I used to be around the house, and that I bought a dishwasher and a tumble drier as soon as I could afford one to make life easier.*

Also raised were alternative strategies such as giving children more responsibility, having older children look after younger ones, and even having them stay home from school in exceptional cases. Mention was also made of children under the age of 10 who go to and from school by themselves. Several respondents described the difficulties lone mothers have in re-establishing their own social and personal networks beyond the home. Most respondents agreed that finding another partner is more difficult for women than it is for men, because of the encumbrance of children. Also, there is the feeling of psychological solitude associated with individual responsibility and having to face alone the consequences of their decisions.

Problems for working lone parents are not so very different from those of couple families, but they are more acute. They include: lack of time, superimposition of work and domestic activities; lack of co-ordination between timetables, especially between school and working hours; exceptional situations, such as children falling ill, or school holidays; and atypical or changeable working hours that are difficult to combine with school hours.

For all women, employment in the public sector is generally more conducive to making work compatible with family needs, mainly because it allows workers greater flexibility, and the employer is often more sensitive to the problem, due to the high percentage of female employees. As one nurse in a public sector hospital recounted:

*I don't even think about working in the private sector, because working hours would just make it too hard to look after the children. Work in the public sector is a straight shift, usually in the mornings.*

Workers in private companies must ask for leave, and are frequently obliged to make up lost time. Reconciling work in the private sector with childcare was shown to be highly problematic, as illustrated by a male respondent with one child, working as an academic in the public sector:

*When my son was born, it turned out that it coincided with the right to maternity leave. My wife couldn't take that option, since she needs to run her business in the afternoons. For paternity leave, I had to forego my salary, and also request leave, which almost cost me my job. Other types of help are just lies: in this town, there's a workers' crèche, but none of the staff are qualified, and its schedule is the same as that of the school, so it doesn't meet the needs of working parents. Help in the form of subsidies and grants for dependent children are impossible to get, since they are given out in accordance with your income, and you'd have to be completely poverty-stricken to get any help. Sometimes we have to pay a babysitter when the grandparents can't look after our son. When he was born, my wife requested a reduction in her hours. They threatened to fire her. This reduction in hours means a reduction in pay as well. But, as it turns out, she has*

to see the same number of patients in 5 hours that she did before in 8. She is at more of a disadvantage since she works in the private sector. All this really makes you think twice about whether to have more children or not.

### **Forced self-reliance**

In spite of recent legislative innovations in family policy, such as the Integrated Plan for Family Support (*Plan Integral de Apoyo a la Familia*) for 2001–04, the Spanish welfare state, with its meagre level of direct aid to families and poor provision of public services, does little to help women hold down a long-term job in a way that is compatible with their family life. Spanish family policy is characterized by a very low level of public spending on measures to support families. Although state support for families is increasing, Spain still has one of the lowest levels of welfare spending on families in the EU. Expenditure on families is also low in other southern European countries. Rossana Trifiletti (1999) argues, for example, that in southern European countries the role of the welfare state, in part as a result of its incomplete development, is to cover risks like job loss or death of the main breadwinner, which could damage the family's ability to maintain sufficient income for all its members. Spanish family policy exclusively targets the most underprivileged social groups, rather than making universal provision. The low level of protection also makes the system inefficient, since it does not guarantee a minimum quality of life for low-income families. The lack of support for working mothers makes it particularly difficult for them to achieve a living wage, thereby reinforcing their reliance on a male breadwinner and family solidarity.

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## **4. Women, Work and Family Life in Transition: the case of post-socialist Estonia**

*Kait Kabun*

This paper explores women's changing roles in paid work and the family as Estonia makes the transition from Soviet-style socialism to western capitalism and prepares to join the European Union. It charts linkages between women's employment and their efforts to combine work and family life as an emerging area of public policy concern in Estonia. The paper argues that the reconciliation of work and family life is not yet a very 'live' practice in Estonia. Until recently, a few good quality surveys had been conducted, but no policy impact assessments. The paper provides an overview of the main trends in the options available to women as well as the penalties they have paid as parents in the labour market during the transition of post-socialist Estonia. It considers the main findings from social science surveys and discusses the reasons for the relative shortage of public policy measures and the unwillingness on the employers' side to address the work-home balance issue more actively. More comprehensive research on workplace practices is advocated as well as a needs assessment analysis to provide a better understanding of the interplay between employment patterns and family-related conditions.

### **Structural changes and individual responses**

The collapse of communism and the introduction of market reforms in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have affected every part of human life. In post-Soviet Estonia, the reconstruction of the political and economic context in the 1990s opened up entirely new horizons for different social groups, including women. Women had much to gain from the transition to a market economy and democratic government as individuals, workers and mothers, family and community members.

During the socialist era, in general, women could not count on their husbands to share household responsibilities or take care of children. Women were forced to go out to work even in the absence of adequate childcare services because full-time work was one of the cornerstones of the Soviet economy. Forced participation in the labour market took away women's freedom to choose their lifestyle, leaving them with limited strategies for combining work and family life. The substantial fall in female activity rates during the transition period at the beginning of the 1990s could be interpreted as women's reaction to their forced 'emancipation' in the labour market and as a voluntary 'return' to the roles of care-giver and wife. Due to the restructuring of the labour market today, women are more likely than men to be excluded from employment.

In Estonia, women's participation in the labour force was high throughout the Soviet period. Their employment rate decreased from 85% in 1989 to 59% in 1993 and then to 51% in 1999. Recent years have seen some improvement, with the rate rising to 57% in 2001. Whereas the possibility of not going out to

work-and shaping personal and family needs according to working conditions should be regarded as the key to understanding the alternatives women faced just after the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, in reality few options were left for them to choose between. To many women, entering the ever-changing job market, with the continuous need to move from one workplace to another more frequently than before, created major challenges as they were forced to adjust to rapid change. At the same time, women continued to hold the main responsibility for childcare and other family-related tasks.

The transition of post-Soviet Estonia has demanded a high social cost from many people by perpetuating the division of the population into winners and losers. In fact, women have more often than men fallen into the latter category as they tend to become more disadvantaged in terms of social and material well-being due to lack of resources and job insecurity (Narusk, 1996). However, the assumptions that women do not want to get involved in paid work or that women themselves have contributed to their worsening status in the labour market are not supported by surveys: as many as 90% of women aged between 25 and 49 (compared to 95.5% of men) work on a full-time basis. Throughout the European Union, 33% of women in employment are working part time (European Commission, 2001). According to the Estonian Labour Force Survey, only 11% of women (and 5% of men) are employed part time in their main job (Statistical Office of Estonia, 2001). Full-time female activity rates, including those for mothers with small children, are still high compared to other European countries.

The reasons why few women work part time in Estonian are, first and foremost, the scarce economic resources of couples with children, which means full-time employment is essential. Given the relatively low rates of child benefits, a considerable decline in the income of one of the spouses would result in a major reduction in the family's budget. Many sociological surveys have shown that families with at least two working adults are better off today than other types of families (Kutsar and Trumm, 1993; Marksoo *et al.*, 2000). Second, being out of employment reduces women's ability to remain competitive when they want to return to the labour market. This is one of the reasons why the birth of the first child is being postponed, and why many mothers are no longer interested in having a second child. For many younger women, hanging on to the present job, delaying marriage and having fewer (or no) children are simply coping strategies to manage economically and maintain their position in the labour market. The third reason may be related to the fact that, in Estonia, the dominant family type has for long been a dual-income family. Giving up or maintaining a job is, therefore, a rather complex matter. On the one hand, the network of childcare facilities significantly decreased during the post-socialist transition. Government subsidies were withdrawn, which makes the costs of public childcare as well as other family-related social services unaffordable for many women. On the other hand, however, leaving employment altogether and taking parental leave are preferable due to the lack of reasonable family-friendly alternatives.

At the attitudinal level, younger women, especially, may think of marriage and motherhood as obstacles to their employment career. In today's society, individuals, be they men or women, are increasingly judged according to their status as measured by their occupational career and economic performance.

As far as public attitudes are concerned, women's choices are more and more shaped by the orientation towards success at work, that is they are socially determined. These trends imply that a redefinition of the family and of womanhood is taking place within Estonian society, as reflected in changing social relationships.

### **Full-time and part-time work: needs, options and realities**

In most Central and East European countries, women's withdrawal from the labour market is seen as a remedy for massive male unemployment and cuts in childcare provided by the state (Hübner, 2001). One of the general features, as well as problems, of the socialist regime was the extensive institutionalization of care services. In practical terms, large-scale social services for family members were provided to create full employment and state-guaranteed free education and social protection. In newly independent Estonia, the responsibility for providing a place in a kindergarten or nursery school for all children living in their municipal area rests with local authorities, many of which are quite small and poor. However, the substantial mismatch between the childcare related duties and the resources available for local governments seems to apply to the entire transition period (Tiko, 2000). Also, there are good grounds for assuming that higher inactivity rates among women, while they are at home taking care of family members, are partly caused by the lack of suitable and affordable care services.

In Estonia, the number of women who are not in the labour market because they are caring for children or other family members has been steadily decreasing since 1992, mostly due to the decline in births. Several studies have revealed that the birth of even one child greatly increases a family's risk of falling below the poverty line (Kutsar and Trumm, 1999). The 1999 Living Conditions Survey again showed that lone-parent households, predominantly headed by a mother, and households with many children are economically the most exposed groups. Working mothers are generally in a relatively vulnerable position in the labour market, as they are not sufficiently covered by social protection. The risk of becoming dependent solely on family benefits and the increasing cost of living may justify the (rational) decisions women make, for example to postpone the birth of a child.

When the special needs of working mothers for a reduction in working time are taken into the consideration, it is striking that 53% of women with one child usually work more than 40 hours per week (Hansson, 2001a). Across the EU, about 53% of women with one child work 35–40 hours per week (Kauppinen, 1999). These data underline the double burden on Estonian women, exacerbated by the lack of flexible working time arrangements (such as part time). The findings from different sociological surveys show that, whereas 34% of women aged 25–34 with small children would have stayed at home if it had been economically possible for them to do so in 1993, the proportion had fallen more than twofold by 1998. Yet, the reverse side of the coin is that, since many working women want to spend more time with the rest of their family, about two-thirds of those aged 25–34 with children would continue working on a part-time basis if they had the opportunity to do so (Hansson, 1999).

The lack of suitable job vacancies and the 'less competitive' family situation leaves young women almost without the prospect of finding work that would better match their family life while maintaining the balance between flexibility and security. Many women in Estonia, therefore, experience a conflict between individual preferences and real options on a daily basis. More comprehensive data are needed to show to what extent women in employment perceive their work as impoverishing their family life and to find out the extent to which women may feel that the family limits their ability to further their careers.

Not surprisingly, according to the available surveys at the end of the 1990s women placed an equally high value on both work and family; family-centered values are also ranked very high in the hierarchy of values (Hansson *et al.*, 1999; Hansson, 2001b). These findings hold true even today but, while women are trying to share themselves equally between work and family responsibilities, they do so only with considerable difficulty. In 2001, two company-based pilot surveys were conducted. They were the first attempts to map the Estonian workplace from a gender perspective. They found that about 40% of women felt that the present situation, where women take the main responsibility for their children, could harm their situation at work creating problems in finding a new job or negotiating a better salary. Regarding the balance between work and family life, women wanted men to make greater use of family leave (Kauppinen and Papp, 2002). The possibility of having more flexible working schedules (part time, shiftwork, job sharing) is reported by women in paid work as being the most effective means of improving their situation (Hansson, 2001a).

The results of a survey conducted by Irja Kandolin (1997) suggest that gender itself has increasingly become a structural factor in Estonian working life; it has contributed to increased economic inequality and to growing feelings of insecurity, particularly among women with small children. Although not yet widely confirmed, research (Antila, and Ylöstalo, 1999) has shown that women have more often experienced unfair treatment based on gender and their family situation than men. In addition, women's age affects their participation in the labour market dramatically, reflecting the link between age and women's reproductive cycle and its associated constraints. At the workplace, different phases of family development affect women more than men. The changes that have occurred in the structure of the labour force, as well as at the workplace, have influenced women's employment relationships to a greater extent than men's.

### **Gender does matter: women's losses on the labour market**

In spite of the fact that unemployment rates are slightly higher for men than for women (12.9% for men and 12.2% for women in 2001), women have to face a larger number of negative factors. As in many other countries, both horizontal and vertical gender segregation of the labour market is characteristic of Estonia. Although women are relatively active in paid work, the investments that have been made in their careers do not give much ground for satisfaction. In many cases, the reverse is true. In 1999, for example, 43% of employed workers were afraid of losing their job within the coming two years, with women

being somewhat more worried than men because of the threat of redundancy (Marksoo *et al.*, 2000).

During the socialist years, pay differences between women and men in Estonia were not very marked since, apart from monetary incomes, indirect job advantages and rewards played an important role in a scarcity economy. The gender wage gap, however, has increased during the post-socialist transition to a market economy, clearly reflecting women's lower status in the labour market (Kandolin, 1996; Vöörmann, 2000). Wage differences have increased, especially in the private sector, where about 59% of women and 77% of men are engaged at present. According to official statistics, women's salaries have averaged about 75% of those of men since 1997.

Yet, the wage gap between men and women cannot be fully explained by differences in their occupations and positions. As the longitudinal sociological study 'Paths of a Generation' (Helemäe *et al.*, 1997) has revealed, women receive lower wages even when all other factors, such as education, qualifications or occupational position, are equal. On one hand, the authors identify differences in the value and remuneration of women's and men's work that were also characteristic of Soviet time. On the other, due to more structural factors, such as the weakness of trade unions and the implementation of a liberal wages policy, the gender pay gap has not narrowed. Consequently, the overall higher levels of educational achievement among women in Estonia have hardly been translated into gender equality, either in the labour market or in family living arrangements.

The deterioration of women's position in the labour market could also be explained by discriminatory practices and poorly targeted labour market policies. Violations of the principle of equal treatment are especially prevalent in the private sector and reflect *de facto* gender discrimination in recruitment and employment. In both cases, having a baby or planning to have one may turn out to be a serious obstacle in terms of women's future careers. Women who are discriminated against very seldom report the situation to the courts or other relevant institutions, because the chance of finding a good job often outweigh any other considerations. Furthermore, many employers primarily see women as mothers, not as well-educated and qualified workers. For the typical employer, having family responsibilities makes women less willing to accommodate to the firm's needs, especially as regards overtime work.

Several other crucial factors that hinder women's competitiveness and determine their lower status in the labour market should be noted. The trade unions have not campaigned to protect women as workers. This is partly related to the lack of implementation mechanisms that would effectively prohibit both direct and indirect gender discrimination. In the EU accession negotiations, Estonia committed itself to the adoption of a gender equality act. However, the apparent unwillingness of Parliament to pass the draft act and persistent opposition to the introduction of a special law among certain interest groups clearly reflect the misinterpretation of the very concept of gender equality as well as the immaturity of society as a whole. Moreover, no traditions of social partnership exist in Estonia to promote measures aimed at creating equal opportunities. The present situation does not favour mutual understanding as the needs and opportunities of employees and employers are

in conflict, most notably on the issues of implementation of working time innovations and adapting working conditions.

Given that traditional family values are still quite widespread in Estonian society, the extent to which women themselves have contributed to maintaining traditional gender roles and stereotypes should also be mentioned. For instance, Anu Narusk (1997) has pointed to the long cultural traditions of Estonian society, which emphasize the image of the mother staying at home rather than encouraging women to improve their social status. Based on studies of gendered outcomes from the Estonian transition, it has also been concluded that the deterioration of the economic position of women usually coincides with the acceptance of more traditional gender roles (Narusk, 2000).

### **'Invisibility' of family issues**

The variety of risks stemming from job losses, low wages, lack of alternative working schedules, work-related health problems, exposure to forms of discrimination, inadequate childcare provision and other issues clearly require policy responses. In Scandinavian states such as Finland or Sweden, social welfare systems have proved to be an efficient mechanism for promoting women's rights and well-being. Given the high standard of living and effective outcomes of social policy measures in these countries, for many policy makers in Estonia, the Nordic social welfare model has served as an ideal type to be followed. In this context, the fact that, during the whole postwar period in Estonia, the employment rate among women remained relatively high is often misconstrued to describe the Estonian family as similar to the Nordic type. In reality, many obstacles, both objective and subjective, contradict this assumption.

Throughout the transition period, Estonia followed a mainly neo-liberal economic course, reflected, for example, in wage policies and uneven government intervention in the affairs of households. The economic well-being of families, both with and without children, has been marked by rapid societal change. For women, the steadily decreasing birth rate has probably been the most negative response to their worsening material situation. This has, no doubt, helped public debate about the status of the family to move out from the margins of the socio-political agenda. However, the issue is presently far from the mainstream. While questions like youth employment, inadequate healthcare services, the welfare of families with several children and so forth are seen as legitimate subjects for public policies, issues like support for women's and mothers' employment or the promotion of equal opportunities are not.

Estonian social policy mainly protects the position of workers who already have established positions in the labour market. It does little for those women and men trying to find employment. In general, more successful social groups are being rewarded as compared with less 'visible' groups of people, and more macro-scale achievements are being prioritized by the state rather than problems at the household level. Similarly, data about individual levels of satisfaction are undervalued, if not ignored altogether, by policy makers. A comparative study carried out among Estonian and Finnish women showed that family responsibilities, the unequal division of household chores between spouses and the presence of children were important familial stressors among

women in Estonia. This was not, however, the case for Finnish working women. The higher degree of stress among Estonian women made the researchers conclude that the greater the economic hardship in a country, the less woman-friendly social policy is likely to be (Narusk and Kandolin, 1997).

The general aim of public policy in Estonia has been to satisfy the needs of rapid economic growth, whereas well-prepared family support measures have been rare. In this respect, the double burden and economic instability experienced by many women in Estonia during the process of social change could be seen as one indication that improving macro-economic performance does not necessarily imply fewer social problems. For instance, the lack of state involvement in promoting more flexible labour relations, resulting in a relative shortage of alternatives for female employees in the labour market, has not been dealt with as a multifaceted concern. In essence, it may reflect the incapacity of policy makers to treat employment and family policies as closely interrelated fields of intervention.

Policy makers seem to consider women as a homogeneous group and do not fully recognize the importance of targeting specific groups of women (women returners, part-time workers, lone parents) that may need to be prioritized when designing more inclusive labour market measures. Although some improvements have been made in terms of finding new ways of increasing women's employability, most clearly expressed in the National Employment Action Plan, work and family issues are not adequately dealt with in the pillars of the NAP. Some aspects of adaptability, as well as the promotion of gender equality in the labour market, are almost wholly ignored; for example the availability of training and skills development opportunities for women on childcare leave or for women returners, and schedules that would meet their other needs.

Combining work and care responsibilities within the family is an important problem in everyday life because both women and men in Estonia work full time. Parents often have difficulty in using child and elder care services due to their economic situation, the area where they live and lack of transport. Today, family-oriented public institutions do not fully meet the personal needs of working women and men. Due to its inability to afford adequate childcare provisions, the state, though not deliberately, leaves the matter of balancing work and care largely on the shoulders of households themselves. As a result of substantial cuts in public services and the dominance of extreme neo-liberal trends in privatization politics, the government has failed to accomplish the objectives of the welfare state to assist families in coping with economic hardships and balancing work and family responsibilities. The implication may be that care in the home is preferred politically to publicly provided institutional care. In much the same way that social expectations of women's and men's roles in Estonian society are still more traditional than in the Nordic countries, attempts to adopt the Scandinavian model for designing and regulating working relations and family policies have largely dissolved into rhetoric. Thus, the challenge of integrating equal opportunities for women and men into labour market policies has yet to be effectively met.

## **Towards a more family-friendly social policy?**

In Estonia, work–life balance has not yet become an issue for public debate, let alone an area of political concern. At a more structural level, the reason why employment and social policy have not started to be addressed systematically may be the increases in unemployment rates, poverty and social exclusion throughout the transition years. Secondly, no major progress is observable in this field in the current development of co-operation between social partners. Growing competition and the increasing prevalence of atypical job contracts make women particularly vulnerable as mothers. In Estonia, the situation calls for well-targeted social policy measures that adequately address changing gender relations and multiple patterns of employment. Such a policy should aim to initiate various family support programmes and introduce further amendments to labour legislation. Employers and businesses need to concentrate increasingly on the welfare of their workers' families.

Competitions for the most family-friendly company, designed to draw attention to family-oriented measures and motivate other companies to follow suit, have not become a regular practice in Estonia. While few positive signs can be found of the acknowledgement of a more participatory workplace culture on the part of employers, the term family-friendly itself still creates confusion among them. At the moment, neither public institutions nor companies seem to be concentrating systematically on promoting change with the aim of meeting gender equality objectives. One of the crucial reasons why the issue has been largely neglected in policy responses is the generally low awareness of equality issues and reconciliation strategies among employers. Their negative attitudes towards the use of special measures aimed at promoting gender equality also play a role. Because of the lack of family-friendly practices, young families, and especially young women, find it difficult to have children if they want to continue their employment career.

These problems could partly be overcome by introducing legal measures, such as the adoption of the gender equality act, as well as organizational measures, to support men and women in combining work and family-related activities. Equality-driven ideas could not be effectively put into practice, unless they are backed by increased awareness and capacity among employers and shifts in value orientations within families.

Whereas the promotion of part-time work still remains a central issue among measures to reconcile work and family life, this can be a two-edged sword for women. Further research is needed to indicate to what extent new ways of organizing work could enable Estonian women to keep their jobs and qualifications, and to what extent it might still take them back to a very traditional gender division of labour in the home. As for men in Estonia, they have traditionally been expected to concentrate their attention mainly on paid work. These aspects may explain why sharing parenthood has not become a common issue in Estonian society. According to the amended Leave Act (enforced at the beginning of 2002), the father of a newborn child is entitled to additional childcare leave (14 calendar days) during the mother's pregnancy leave and maternity leave, or during the next couple of months after the birth of a child. The amendment is undoubtedly a significant new right for fathers and clearly acknowledges that both men and women have family duties. Whether

this will be accompanied by changes in men's behaviour by making them more involved in family responsibilities is too early to tell.

As a future member state of the EU, Estonia will benefit from resources such as the European Social Fund that will serve as a useful additional means to implement national employment strategies in a more coherent manner. In the national context, one of the most important tasks is to highlight the benefits of more flexible patterns of work for both employees and businesses. When organizations and companies are encouraged to implement family-friendly policies, they are often viewed as mainly benefitting female employees through flexible working time and parental leave arrangements, without changing work organization. It is, therefore, difficult to measure the 'quality' of the work environment, assuming that it should benefit the employer, the workplace and employees as well as their families. There seems to be a clear need for Estonian workplaces to design new strategies to promote a better balance between work and family life. The ways in which these kinds of practices could serve as a competitive advantage, including purely financial gains, need to be more thoroughly explored and explained to those responsible for organizational change.

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## 5. The 2000 Green Paper and the British Family-Friendly Debate

*Peter Ackers*

British employment policies have changed quite significantly since the election of New Labour in 1997, following 18 years of strongly neo-liberal Conservative employment policy, which had included rejection of the EU Social Chapter. Although Labour is often perceived in continental Europe as committed to flexible labour markets, by the benchmark of what had gone before, the current government has substantially increased employment regulation. It has done so, both of its own initiative and by signing up to the EU Social Chapter. Policies on the national minimum wage, statutory union recognition, working time and parental leave have changed the legal and institutional framework of British employment relations (Ewing, 2003). They have also helped to shape employer and trade union initiatives in the direction of social partnership and family-friendly policies (Ackers and Payne, 1998). This paper draws on interviews and material from websites surrounding the debate on the government policy proposal, *Work and Parents: competitiveness and choice. A Green Paper* (Department of Trade and Industry, 2000), the first major initiative of its kind in the UK.

### **An emerging family and employment agenda**

While family-friendly policies have existed at the company level, in some instances long before the change of government, the term entered into general debate and usage as a result of the Green Paper. Most economic actors recognized that family-friendly issues had become much more central during the 1990s, especially since 1997. They put this down to the growing feminization of the workforce, concerns over stress and the UK 'long-hours culture', and the influence of EU and New Labour policies, especially on parental leave. The subtitle of the Green Paper, 'competitiveness and choice' illustrates the three different rationales that the government attempted to capture. First, they tried to argue the business case that family-friendly policies are good human resource management (HRM) and would improve the retention and motivation of employees and, ultimately, competitiveness. Second, they wished to persuade employers and employees that they were providing choice in the sense of prompting flexible local arrangements rather than imposing one blueprint. Third, by their silence over rights, they were aware that they were proposing statutory measures and that they needed to do little to win over their natural supporters: the childcare lobby and trade unions. In Britain, the policy debate has hitherto concentrated on female caring roles and the extension of maternity leave. However, the Green Paper introduced the topic of statutory paternity leave, which was implemented in the March 2001 budget, and debate is emerging over whether the emphasis should shift to the equalization of parental rights and responsibilities.

The HRM professional body, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), became involved in the family-friendly agenda in the

early 1990s, when it published a report 'Work and Family'. The topic was conceived in more traditional terms as 'career-friendly employment policies to support standard work patterns' (CIPD interview), mainly for women. Today, the CIPD recognizes that patterns of work are much more complex as the UK moves towards a 24/7 society, which rules out standard general solutions, such as workplace nurseries. Its view is close to the tenor of the Green Paper. They see family-friendly employment policies as much more part of a managing diversity agenda, which includes other issues such as elder care. It accepts that not everyone works or lives in the same way and that employers and individuals are entitled to choice and individuality. The pressure for work-life balance policies comes from both individuals and the labour market. The CIPD wants to develop dialogue between employers and employees about what each wants and how they can fit together. In this respect, family-friendly policies are part of a broader debate about the future of work and the psychological contract between employer and employee.

The national employers' body, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) also accepts that family-friendly issues became much more prominent from the late 1990s, as part of broader concern with work-life balance. The shift has been employee-driven in a tight labour market and has reflected other trends, such as the growth of the service sector, female employment and new technology, allowing other forms of working to develop. Legislation also shaped the process, and the CBI recognizes that it could appear reactive in relation to concerns about excessive state regulation. However, it is anxious to stress its support for proactive companies taking voluntary initiatives and to adopt a more positive and active role in the work-life balance debate (CBI interview).

Trade unions recognize that family-friendly employment policies are central to their future, as they attempt to win members in an increasingly feminized workforce. They strongly support further state regulation in this area, supplemented by collective bargaining, and stress the rights side of the argument along with the business case, as befits a movement that now champions partnership with employers to produce organizational and national success.

### **The Green Paper and employment regulation**

The extent of state regulation of employment remains a central ideological issue amongst UK employment actors. Trade unions, family and women's groups advocate more government and EU regulation, both in terms of HRM and employee rights. In response, employers, particularly small businesses, stress the red tape and extra costs that have been imposed on them. New Labour has tried to strike a balance between these two camps, and the CBI has moved to a less dogmatic position. For instance, it now accepts that the minimum wage has worked well, while resisting other measures such as the EU's works council proposal. Most economic actors agree that employees should be regarded as both individuals and parts of families and that this entails a role for both employers and the state. However, a strong neo-liberal strand among some employer groups combines hostility to regulatory red tape with a belief that employees must justify their value in labour market terms alone. These views have been propounded by the Institute of Directors (IoD), which

was strongly supportive of right-wing Conservative employment policies, a view often shared by small business spokespersons. They tend to coalesce with a strong hostility, in principle, to European social policy. Many employers' and managers' attitudes have been socialized by two decades of weak trade unions and very light state regulation. Some are now responding to the rather different mood under New Labour.

The CIPD argued that many employers' bodies are scared of state regulation *per se* and, as a result, bring a very negative mentality to the work-life agenda. In this view, the CBI, IoD and Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) are very reactive, while, on the other side, the rights approach, championed by family pressure groups, also polarizes opinion and creates the wrong climate. The result is a polarized debate between an apparently extremist employer community and the trade union and family lobby. The CIPD would prefer to see employers take voluntary action, but recognizes that employment law may be a necessary 'driver' to move recalcitrant employers and to provide some base-line foundation for employees with less labour market power. It did recognize that pure discretion produces problems, namely bad employers who offer no provision for their workers. Ideally, it would like to see a core statutory framework, and then a more flexible system built upon it, based on trust between employers and employees. It also anticipated interesting unintended consequences, in the same way as the national minimum wage has had a big impact on equal opportunities through raising the pay of part-time women workers. The CIPD saw that family factors are an indirect cause of pay inequality and felt that the government has recognized this and switched from going to the law for everything to encouraging initiatives at voluntary level. This said, legal initiatives do capture attention and set an agenda (CIPD interview).

Employers' representatives were more concerned about the quantity of employment legislation over recent years than family-friendly policies as an issue in its own right. The CBI Director-General complained of 'the relentless build-up of new regulations' and added:

*Businesses are still struggling to absorb the 15 pieces of employment legislation introduced this parliament and we are already well into a debate about another tranche of possible laws. Ministers must understand that firms need a breathing space to enhance their productivity.* (CBI website statement, 27.11.00)

They would like more time to see how the legislation works and how employers find it. For example, the CBI helped to negotiate the EU directive on parental leave, which constituted a big culture change for UK business. It felt that some of the Green Paper proposals had come too soon and would have liked to have explored non-legislative options before further statutory rights. Such options include how to provide better information and advice for employers, and ways of encouraging voluntary best practice, as in CBI's own Headstart initiative, which made a 'commitment to equality and diversity' (CBI website). Employers were looking for a business-friendly approach, with policies to suit particular employer and employee situations, and the CBI feared that legislation would damage voluntary flexibility that already exists. It would like to see employers and employees find joint solutions at local level and was concerned about making policies pursued by the most advanced employers a blueprint for

statutory regulations. This would set the standard too high for some businesses, especially small firms, while undermining the labour market attraction of active voluntary best practice in terms of designing schemes to draw employees to companies. Above all, employers were concerned about the cumulative impact of employment regulation and the cost of red tape. Even where the state funded welfare schemes, they incurred costs for administering policies such as the directive on working time and Working Family Tax Credits. The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), which claims to represent over 150,000 small businesses, was particularly vociferous in its opposition to what it sees as red tape that puts small businesses at a competitive disadvantage. Another concern in small firms is providing cover for employees on maternity or paternity leave.

The trade unions have unanimously and strongly supported the government and EU initiatives on employment regulation, and worked with the Maternity Alliance to make them as strong as possible. The Trade Union Congress (TUC) General Secretary welcomed the Green Paper proposing new rights for working parents:

*Working women everywhere will welcome the substantial increases in maternity pay and leave. It shows the government has been listening to Britain's working parents. Many new mothers return to work earlier than is good for them or their baby because they do not have enough leave or cannot afford to stay home longer.... We applaud the proposals to give fathers paid paternity leave. Good employers already give dads time off, now even the meanest should be forced to do the same. (TUC website statement, 7.12.00)*

The female national organizer of the Transport and General Workers Union (T&G) at the same event also welcomed this extension of 'workers rights':

*Treating workers like people, rather than machines, is the way to get the best out of them. These proposals show that the government is listening to the concerns of people struggling to balance work and family life. The proposals also show that the government has been looking at what increases productivity and gets skilled and experienced employees back to work. The reality is that employers and the government can either make having a baby and return to work a positive experience or an extremely difficult one. Having a child is a time of great transition for the whole family and we need workers to feel they will not lose out by taking leave. (T&G website statement, 7.12.00)*

The General Secretary of Knitwear, Footwear and Allied Trades (KFAT), the union for the highly feminized footwear and textile industry, welcomed the Green Paper:

*Earlier this year we surveyed all our women members and were told quite clearly that longer maternity leave, better maternity pay and more flexibility were needed to balance work and parenthood. Many said that under present arrangements, they and their babies lost out as a result. (KFAT website statement, 7.12.00)*

The research involved interviews with women at six textile and shoe factories, conducted by the Labour MP, Harriet Harman, as part of the union's submission to the government's Review of Maternity Pay and Leave. The union leader rejected claims that the government were placing excessive burdens on industry:

*They have made the same arguments about the national minimum wage yet we've seen no adverse effects. When the government already meets the cost of statutory maternity pay such claims are clearly exaggerated. Indeed, why can't they learn from other countries; in Europe they've had better maternity rights than us for years. (TUC website statement, 7.12.00)*

Moreover, he felt the proposal in the Green Paper could actually benefit employers:

*These changes would help employers to hold on to skilled workers, saving them money on recruitment and training costs. We must remember that society is changing, with people starting families later in life. More women work than ever before, and an increasing number of men want to spend more time with their children. Our working environment must take account of this change. (TUC website statement, 7.12.00)*

### **Family-friendly policies as good HRM**

Access to genuine family-friendly arrangements, provided by employer discretion or negotiated with trade unions, is more difficult to gauge than it first appears. Part-time working is very prevalent in the UK, especially among women in the service sector. However, part-time arrangements are often employer driven and may not be linked to employee family priorities. Moreover, they may be associated with dead-end jobs with no career prospects. Flexible working in career positions is still difficult and controversial in many business organizations. The lead for practical family-friendly policies often comes from employers in the heavily feminized service sector, reflecting very immediate and yet long-running labour market needs. The CIPD and CBI both referred to 'vanguard organizations' in groups like Employers for Choice, including banks and large supermarkets, but very big variations are found between sectors, and many of these 'voluntary' schemes have been 'pushed' by EU and government intervention that has heightened the agenda.

The CIPD argued that a strong business case exists for family-friendly and diversity policies and that it needs to be developed. The HRM case advocates investing in people and making the most of the available human resources. A larger business case is also made, linked to delivering flexibility for the customer in the 24/7 society. It connects employee diversity to employers' needs for flexibility. Other big drivers for employers are increased individual litigation around stress, which puts 'the fear of God' into many of them; and concerns for recruitment and retention of employees in a tight labour market in 'the scramble for talent'. In addition, employees are beginning to ask for these measures and are developing new expectations of their employment. Personnel managers regularly field such questions from employees, and they have been encouraged by national best practice programmes, like Investors in People. In the past, such concerns were often short lived and linked to the state of labour market, but we may be seeing the creation of more long-term expectations. In the CIPD's view, many UK employers are still locked into old thinking about employment patterns and have yet to catch up with these new expectations (CIPD interview).

The CBI too felt that that family-friendly policies were part of best practice and that a business case could be made at times – for instance with flexible

working – but not always. In its view, policies like parental leave also pose problems and costs for some businesses and a big division was identified between large and small firms. The latter had real problems covering for key individuals, such as a finance director going on maternity leave or working part-time, while the new administration system also meant new costs and difficulties. As a result, best practice tends to be found in the female-dominated service sectors, where employers have a much stronger economic incentive to deal with these issues (CBI interview). In response to the Green Paper, the CBI Deputy Director-General argued that flexible employment practice needed to be ‘encouraged not regulated’. Small firms, in particular, would suffer, when ‘they are still absorbing the laws recently put on the statute book’, and would be particularly concerned about the practicality of offering part-time work to full-time employees, something that might lead to further litigation:

*The government has recognized that business needs help providing flexible employment, but it should avoid using employment legislation to achieve this. ... British companies are world leaders in flexible working patterns – we have the second highest number of part-time workers in Europe. It makes sense for us to make use of all available talent. But the idea can only succeed if employers and employees are free to make arrangements that suit their particular circumstances.* (CBI website statement, 7.12.00).

Overall, employers favour the voluntary approach (with or without unions) as being closer to their own and their employee needs than imposed blueprints, allowing best practice to be disseminated in a piecemeal way and allowing Employers for Choice to garner the labour retention and motivation benefits of their policies.

Since 1979, the coverage of collective bargaining in the UK has fallen from 75 to perhaps 40%, making it a potentially far less significant channel for family-friendly policies than it used to be (Cully *et al.*, 1998). Nevertheless, another feature of UK employment relations since 1997 has been a modest increase in union membership and influence allied to the development of voluntary social partnership agreements between employers and trade unions, modelled on EU examples and encouraged by the Labour government. These new style agreements, that go beyond old style adversarial bargaining over wages and conditions, often include family-friendly provisions. For example, the agreement between the finance union, UNIFI, and Barclays includes new maternity and paternity rights, beyond the statutory proposals of the Green Paper. The union national secretary said:

*This clearly shows the benefits of partnership to both staff and the bank. Barclay's stance on parental leave puts it in the lead of other employers.* (UNIFI website statement, 24.10.00)

UNIFI strongly supported the Green Paper, while pushing the government to go further on paternity leave. A union spokesman argued:

*The onus is on employers to ensure that their workforce, particularly staff with families, does not end up working longer and more anti-social hours. Obviously huge profit-making organizations, such as the major banks, can afford to ensure that this does not happen.* (UNIFI website statement, 7.12.00)

In this way, the UK unions have adopted a twin-track approach of lobbying the government to raise the statutory platforms, while negotiating higher level

voluntary schemes with good employers that have strong labour market needs to attract and retain women employees and can afford to pay. The large public sector Union, UNISON, with a significant female membership, has produced Bargaining Support Guides on negotiating time off for dependants and negotiating parental leave (see UNISON website). The TUC General Secretary argued that, 'Britain's good employers already provide benefits in excess' of those recommended in the Green Paper (TUC website). The trade unions, however, see little prospect of this virtuous minority spreading their example to the rest of the workforce. They value statutory regulation because they fear that labour market driven policies may favour the employer over employees, be short lived and only cover collectively or individually strong labour market groups.

### **Weak regulation of working time**

Most employment actors recognize that the UK has a long-hours culture like the US, and the Institute of Management has reported on research that managers' long hours are damaging their family life. However, employers perceive that trade unions are unwilling to push for hours reduction, for instance by tightening up the implementation of the EU directive on working time. As a result, while the directive increased annual holiday provision for many employees, it has had little impact on the hours employees work, particularly in the poorly regulated service sector. There, companies routinely expect employees to sign waiver forms to work over 48 hours. The emphasis of the government, employers and the unions has been elsewhere: on the availability of flexible working options during key parenting periods.

The CIPD acknowledges that Britain has a long-hours culture. Its Choice and Diversity agenda says if people want to work long hours let them, but this should not become the standard for everyone. It also wondered whether long hours are associated with low productivity. In the CIPD's view, employers' hostile reactions to the directive was misplaced, when, in fact it did not have a lot of teeth, but was the 'emperors new clothes' (CIPD interview). The CBI too accepted that the UK has a long-hours culture and that this can be expensive for business through overtime payments. As an alternative, it promotes schemes like annualized hours. In the CBI's view, the UK implemented the directive too rigidly to begin with and without sufficient consultation with employers. New amendments to regulations have loosened the process. For instance, employers were forced to keep a record of all hours, even when employees had signed a waiver or were not working over the 48-hour maximum. However, many large employers had negotiated implementation with trade unions and were stuck with the old, rigid interpretation. The CBI is conducting research on the implementation of the directive in the EU. Overall, it felt that reducing all working hours is not the issue – since to some extent this is a lifestyle choice and UK unions are not pushing hard on it – and that the focus should be on protecting the vulnerable and giving people a choice (CBI interview).

## **The impact of EU regulation**

For the past decade, the Conservative party and the lead UK employers' organizations have been eurosceptic, particularly on employment issues, while labour and the unions have been increasingly pro-EU. The former see Europe as a free market, while the latter, particularly the unions, place much greater emphasis on the social dimension. The General, Municipal and Boilermakers (GMB) union and four other general and manufacturing unions have produced A Trade Union Agenda for Europe, which begins: 'The story of Britain's involvement in the European Union is one of success', including 'better rights for working people'. It criticizes 'anti-European xenophobes' (GMB website 14.12.00). From this perspective, EU directives on working time, European works councils, equal opportunities and parental leave appeared as an important antidote to Conservative deregulation of the labour market, even before the change in government.

Trade unions and others argue that even voluntary company family-friendly initiatives may benefit from an EU or government prompt to set a baseline for poor employers and stimulate more employer activity. EU regulation on equal opportunities and parental leave has played a central role in bringing the debate on family-friendly policies to the fore. The existing large presence of women in the service labour force and current labour shortages have created a receptive audience on both sides of industry. The CIPD has no direct influence at Brussels, unlike the CBI and TUC. It perceives a social ideology behind EU social policy, but also recognizes a business/HRM case underpinning many policies, and they would like to know more about business thinking on these matters across the rest of the EU. Personnel bodies exist in other EU countries, but contact with them has been limited. The CIPD felt that policy implementation needs to allow for different national contexts, such as the large proportion of part-time working in the UK. For this reason, it believed that the EU should not impose family-friendly models based on different work-family arrangements.

The CBI works with other EU employers on EU issues, but not on domestic issues like the Green Paper. It saw this as more about responding to EU proposals than developing a common employer agenda. A measure of national social partnership has also developed since 1997, and the CBI meets with the TUC informally on these issues. For instance, they held a joint seminar with the Equal Opportunities Commission on family-friendly policies, though this has not been a case of formal social partnership as with the national minimum wage. The IoD takes a much firmer, free-market view on employment issues and EU initiatives, while the CBI is more pragmatic. It recognizes that big differences exist in current EU provision for parental leave, since these issues have been more important for much longer in other EU countries such as Sweden.

## **Equal opportunities versus family-friendly policies**

Equal opportunities between men and women, at least at the level of rhetoric, is now part of the conventional wisdom of almost all UK policy actors, including employers' associations and trade unions. Employers are particularly aware of

a potential tension between equal opportunities and family policies. This may be between male and female rights (maternity versus paternity provision) or between the rights of parents and those without children, some of whom may be involved in eldercare or simply have made a lifestyle choice to remain single. Many economic actors see a solution in stressing managing diversity, whereby all the various groups bring their own particular contribution to the organization, and by talking more generally of work–life balance to be customized for everyone in their own way.

The CIPD felt a real danger existed of an employee backlash against family-friendly or mother-friendly policies, from single people and those who have managed for themselves without any extra help: the queen bees. Such a situation could arise if employers are ‘not smart enough to be inclusive’ and present family-friendly as part of a choice agenda linked to peoples’ lives outside work, including things like sabbaticals and opportunities to vary work commitments and ‘plug in and out’. In the CIPD’s view, this needs more joined-up thinking. The CBI also noted that company schemes have moved away from a narrow family-friendly emphasis to broader work–life balance to avoid these problems. Their director general warned ‘of a possible backlash against parts of the government work–life balance initiative that benefit parents at the expense of staff without children’ (CBI website, statement 01.02.01). Instead, it preferred voluntary schemes that offer opportunities for everyone, whether to care for elders or to pursue hobbies, as long as effects on business are at least neutral. Employees should be able to balance work and family life, which is good for business because it means they are happier and more committed to the company,

The Industrial Society (recently renamed The Work Foundation), a think-tank funded by employers and trade unions, argued that the government should equalize maternity and paternity rights in order to close the gender gap. It maintains:

*Every extension of maternity rights that is not matched by an equal extension of paternity rights is a step in the wrong direction. Every such move gives employers a rational reason to choose Ben over Mary and seals half the workforce in the woman=mother=carer trap. (Industrial Society website, 23.8.00)*

In its view, the government, Equal Opportunities Commission and the TUC all ‘make the mistake of thinking that the pay gap between men and women is irrational’. Men run most business organizations and there is ‘little hope of attitudes changing if the men dictating cultures are not taking time off’.

Trade unions strongly support orthodox equal opportunities policies and see little tension, as yet, between these and family-friendly policies. This partly reflects their strong need and desire to develop a campaigning agenda that is attractive to the large and growing female workforce. The woman deputy general secretary of T&G strongly rejected the Industrial Society report on Mothers versus men as ‘out of touch with the real working agenda’ and called for ‘full steam ahead’ on the extension of maternity rights:

*The reality is that women are still battling against discrimination to get what they deserve. Telling them to back down because they might damage their employability is the worst kind of scare mongering. Women are the ones who go through labour and they are society’s main child carers. That has to be*

*recognized in the rights that they are given and those rights must be enshrined in law. We have had centuries of delay over women's equality. This government has given new impetus for women's rights in the workplace. To kill the momentum now would be criminal.* (T&G website statement, 23.8.2000)

The CIPD was particularly interested in discovering what the drivers are for family-friendly policies, how the different EU countries vary in approach, and how far multinationals develop a standard diversity/family-friendly package and transfer it to other countries, and how far they simply adjust to the minimum standards of each country. It was also concerned to hear about instances of transferable best practice, since personnel managers are looking for packages they can use in their workplace and play a key role in their implementation. For this reason, it was also looking at the process of change management, by which to win support for such policies, linked to the main drivers in the workplace and society.

### **Embedding family-friendly policies**

UK family-friendly employment policies remain tenuous for a number of reasons. At the company level, many have been introduced to attract women into the labour market during a period of full employment. Similar policies, such as workplace nurseries, were introduced by firms in the economic boom of the late 1980s, but abandoned in the recession that followed. The current Labour government has embedded the new wave of family-friendly policies in a statutory framework of employment rights. This regulation is still contested, ideologically and politically, however, by the main Conservative opposition and, to a lesser extent, by employers' representatives. This said, the Conservatives have already abandoned their initial opposition in principle to the national minimum wage, because they recognize this would be a major vote loser among those who have benefited from it. Likewise, it is unlikely they would rescind the support for parental leave. Nonetheless, they remain opposed to further state regulation of the labour market, and it seems quite likely that a future Conservative government would dilute the existing modest (by continental European standards) measures. By contrast, the sheer number of women working and with expectations of reconciling working and family life may have created an important political constituency that no government can ignore. UK family-friendly policies are not yet deeply embedded, but they do have an economic and social momentum, supported by a statutory framework. The 2000 Green Paper both illuminated differences between economic actions over family-friendly policies and showed that they were in a state of flux.

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## 6. Conceptualizing Dual-Earner Families in the UK: Matching Policy with Practice

*Elizabeth Such*

Dual-earner families with dependent children have become increasingly characteristic of the socio-demographic profile in western societies since the 1970s. In contrast to the interwar and postwar periods when the male breadwinner model was dominant, employment among women with children is now very high in most EU member states (Franco and Winqvist, 2002). In the United Kingdom about two-thirds of all mothers with a child aged under 16 were in paid employment by 1997. In relation to other EU countries, the UK has a relatively high economic activity rate for women, but is still characterized by lower rates for women with very young children and relatively high part-time rates as in Germany and Ireland. In the British context, the rapid and widespread growth in mothers' employment since the 1970s has contributed to the emergence of the dual-earner family as a dominant contemporary family form.

The growth of dual-earner families in the 1980s and early 1990s took place in the context of an absence of policies that targeted households with two earners. While the diversification of family forms and labour market restructuring was the topic of political debate and policy change throughout the period, dual-earner families were not presented as a policy challenge. The New Labour government brought to power in 1997 has, however, pursued a cautious but more explicit policy line in relation to dual-earner family life owing to their concern both to reduce welfare spending and to promote the economic well-being of households, thereby tackling child poverty. The government's desire to retain the skills of women in the labour market also implies that dual-earner families are being increasingly recognized as an inevitable characteristic of the UK's family–employment profile.

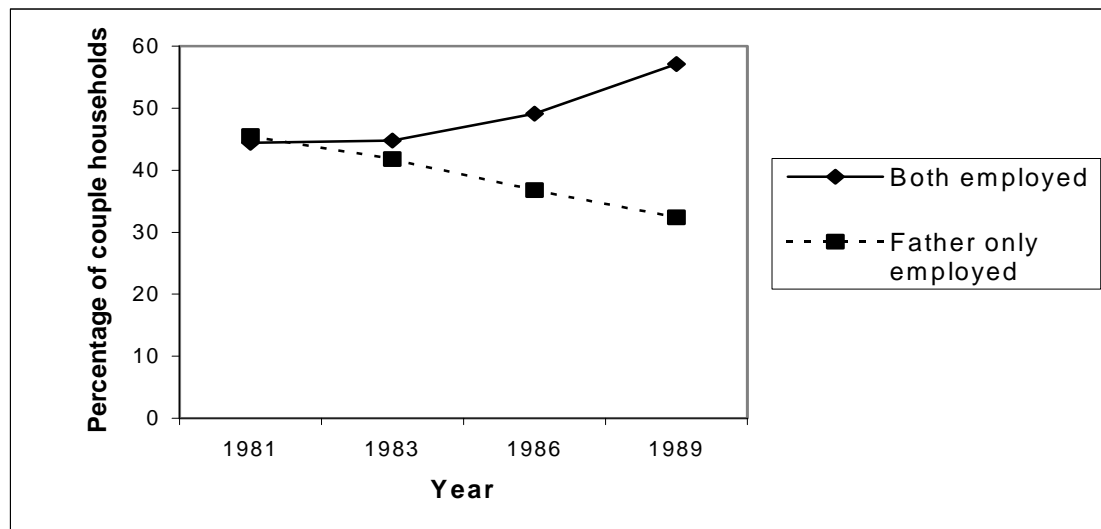
This paper problematizes existing conceptualizations of dual-earner families by exploring the relationship between changes in the labour market, state policies and household structures in Britain at both macro and micro levels. Data from large-scale national surveys and policy debates are combined with the results of a qualitative study on the everyday lives of dual-earner couples with dependent children, to contrast the construct of dual-earner families as presented in policy and politics with the daily experiences of couples. Examples of how families organize childcare and how couples reconcile work and home are directly compared with the institutionalized conceptions of dual-earner families.

### **Dual-earner families in the socio-demographic profile of the UK**

Dual-earner families do not constitute a discrete group with uniform characteristics. Dual-earner family households may contain married and unmarried couples with or without dependent children; partners may be employed full time, part time, do shift work or temporary work to produce a range of dual-earner configurations. The variety within the dual-earner structure

renders its accurate statistical measurement problematic, and routine, consistent, and precise national data on dual-earner families have not been collected in the UK. Data taken from the British Household Panel Survey, however, shows a clear increase in the percentage of dual-earner couple households relative to the percentage of 'male breadwinner' couple households in the 1980s (Figure 6.1).

**Figure 6.1 Combined employment status of mothers and fathers in couple households in the UK, 1981–89**



*Note:* Prior to 1989, couples who were cohabiting but not married were not included in the data.

*Source:* Harrop and Moss (1995), table 3, p. 437.

In the 1990s, trend data suggested a leveling off of the proportion of dual-earner families in the population. In 1998, the combined employment status of partners among 'working age households' (defined as households that include 'at least one person of working age, i.e. a woman aged between 16 and 59 or a man aged between 16 and 64') that were dual-earner was 58% of all couples with dependent children (Office for National Statistics, 1999). This equates to around one quarter of the population living in dual-earner families in the mid to late 1990s.

Statistics show that dual-earner families are largely constituted of 'one-and-a-half' earners, in other words, the (male) full-time, female part-time earning structure predominates. In 1995, it was estimated that among the 62% of married couples who were dual-earner, 22% of couples both worked full time, whereas 40% were one-and-a-half earner couples (Burghes *et al*, 1997). Part-time working among women, and especially mothers, is a particularly dominant feature of the employment profile of the UK relative to many of its EU neighbours (Hantrais, 2000, p. 8).

These statistics show that dual-earner families are significant in the socio-demographic profile in the UK. They have outnumbered the male breadwinner family since the early 1980s, and their dominance has been maintained

throughout the 1990s. They represent a group that is not only significant within the profile of couple households but also among all household groups in the UK. They have the potential to contain several within-group differences at both family and employment levels. Two questions are posed for UK policy makers: Does the relatively high level of dual earnership warrant a policy response and if so, to what extent should within-group differences be taken into account?

### **Dual-earner families in politics and policy**

Policy and politics rarely focused directly on the dual-earner family either throughout its period of growth or consolidation. Since 1997, however, Tony Blair's New Labour government has pursued a more explicit policy and political line with regard to dual earning by promoting family self-sufficiency through employment. This approach is by no means restricted to couple families; employment is regarded as fundamental to economic well-being and as a safeguard against poverty for all families and households (Dean and Shah, 2002; Rowlingson and Millar, 2002). Those at greatest risk of economic hardship and poverty such as lone-parent families have been a particular target of New Labour family-related policy (for example the New Deal for Lone Parents and in-work tax credits). The promotion of gainful employment among families with dependent children reflects the dual concern of government not only to reduce family, and especially child poverty, but to control or reduce welfare spending. Parental employment is, therefore, a key goal of the current government; dual earnership, by implication, represents an important family-employment configuration that is recognized as a means of meeting government's policy aims.

Examples of New Labour initiatives that promote both parental employment and dual earning include the raft of tax credits aimed at families, including the Working Families' Tax Credit (WFTC) and the Childcare Tax Credit (CCTC). The prerequisite of such credits is that at least one adult member of a household with dependent children is in employment. WFTC and CCTC supplements the incomes of employed family households according to a sliding scale of support: as collective household income increases, the contribution of the tax credit decreases. The credits facilitate dual earnership among low to middle income households by continuing support up to a relatively high income ceiling. The underlying policy assumption is that families eventually become economically independent as the financial benefits of two incomes are realized. Dual earning is, therefore, supported in policy as a means of lifting families and children out of being at risk of financial hardship. While worklessness among households is frequently cited as a cause of poverty (HM Treasury, 2001), 'workfulness' in the form of dual-earning is used as an indicator of economic well-being.

Financial risk is not the only risk factor that has been associated with family life in policy and politics in the UK. Social risk has also been associated with particular family forms, particularly lone parents. While the Labour government does not openly stigmatize alternative family forms, family breakdown, as represented by divorce and reconstitution, as represented by step-families continue to be the subject of policy and political concern (Barlow and Duncan, 2000a; 2000b). Couple families and, New Labour purport, those

headed by married couples represent a stable family form that supports social good rather than presenting a social problem (Home Office, 1998; Straw, 1998). As a consequence, dual- (biological) parent families are removed from the need for state interference. The assumed absence of social risk and financial risk has resulted in dual-earner families being one of the least overtly governed family forms in the UK since the 1970s.

The concepts of social and economic risk have been applied quite consistently in UK family-related policy over the past two administrations. New Labour's Conservative predecessors espoused similar principles in terms of family policy: government intervention in family life was only considered legitimate when the financial and social well-being of its members were at risk (Crompton, 1997). A key point of departure in New Labour's approach and in its formulation of a 'family policy' (Home Office, 1998) is the extent to which combining employment and family life is understood as a lifestyle choice.

Successive Conservative governments viewed dual earning as an issue for decision making within the family unit. As a consequence, the implications of dual earning were left to the discretion of the individual. Childcare is an obvious example of how dual earning was individualized in terms of its practical implications: parents, not policy, were expected to meet childcare needs. Like the Conservatives, New Labour conceptualizes decisions to earn in terms of individual families making rational cost-benefit economic choices about the employment activities of household members based on personal gain (Barlow and Duncan, 2000b). New Labour also, however, views dual earning as an inevitable consequence of citizens' duty or responsibility to provide financially for their families. This moral argument based on notions of citizenship has, in part, informed New Labour's policy approach to families. Policies such as those associated with the National Childcare Strategy have been designed to create an environment in which parental employment is enabled. In addition to greater provision of childcare, New Labour has also introduced policies that improve the conditions of employed parents (for example better maternity, paternity and parental rights). This slightly altered emphasis highlights the responsibilities of the state to provide an environment that enables citizens to fulfil their own responsibilities.

New Labour has been further encouraged to reassess the balance between the individual's and the state's responsibility for dual-earner families because of an expressed need to retain women in the labour market throughout childrearing. In addition, the UK has to meet its commitment to the EU Social Chapter by accommodating family-focused European directives on maternity leave, parental leave, part-time work and working time (Duncan, 2002).

The relatively high level of dual earnership has, therefore, warranted a policy response that, in part, recognizes within-group differences. The current government appears to use moral and economic arguments that promote a model of self-sufficient dual earning. Families are expected to balance paid work and family life by making maximum use of resources within the home and within the private sector (for example for childcare). Governments meet their responsibilities to citizens by providing a range of minimal support measures, such as nursery places and unpaid parental leave for family reasons. In the context of such an approach, the New Labour government actively promotes part-time employment of mothers in the early years of children's lives as a way

of matching income needs with the caring needs of children (Home Office, 1998). This approach is clearly gendered and hinges on theories of rational economic choice, a notion that has been strongly disputed (Barlow and Duncan, 2000a; 2000b; Duncan and Edwards, 2002).

### **The everyday experiences of dual-earner families in a UK case study**

The following explores the lifestyles of dual-earner families and contrasts these with the institutionalized conceptions described. A case study of the experiences of 14 dual-earner couples in the UK is used here to contrast the dual-earner family in policy with that in practice. A series of in-depth interviews with heterosexual couples with children of school age were carried out between May and September 2000 to examine the ways in which individuals experienced paid and unpaid work, family and leisure throughout the lifecourse and, in particular, in the context of dual earning.

Two components of lifestyle that were repeatedly cited in the interviews as crucial to the experience of dual earning – childcare and reconciling work and home – are used to illustrate the experiences of dual-earner families and answer the question: how do institutionalized concepts of dual earning relate to the everyday lives of two-earner families in the UK?

#### CHILDCARE: A PUBLIC OR PRIVATE ISSUE?

The arrangements dual-earner couples made for childcare were complex and varied. The respondents, mostly in their forties, reported that childcare was mainly shared between the couples themselves, although other formal and informal networks were also used. These include members of the extended family, friends, neighbours, childminders and formalized baby-sitting networks.

Opinions varied as to the advantages and disadvantages of using different forms of childcare, and many couples expressed a preference to divide childcare between themselves and to use only external care in the absence of any other realistic alternative. The following comment made by a male self-employed respondent reflects this: *'The ideal childcare situation is where the child or children get looked after by us. ... That's ideal, where nobody else has to be brought in to look after them'*. Self-sufficiency was often expressed as an ideal situation, often in the context of childcare as a parental responsibility according to a male computer manager: *'I think it's the parents who should look after them if possible'*. This philosophy corresponds to governmental approaches to childcare that emphasize the ideal of care provided in the home.

Full-time parental responsibility for childcare, however, often required one partner either to be absent from the labour market or work part-time, flexible hours. All of the women in the study either took an extended period of leave from the labour market or reduced their working hours when one or all of their children were of pre-school age. This reflects official statistics that show that maternal employment is lowest when the youngest child of the family is aged 0–4 years.

Financial pressures and a need for mental stimulation were regularly cited as reasons for a return to the labour market, and it was at this stage in the lifecourse that both women and men expressed an explicit need for childcare

beyond that which they could provide themselves. Although in some cases full-time work was returned to, and in one case the male partner took primary responsibility for care to allow his partner to develop her career, the explicitly gendered nature of childcare restricted mothers' opportunities for paid employment. While the current government recognizes that part-time work presents opportunities for mothers to balance work and home life, there is less recognition that such work is not available at all levels of employment and often leads to a curtailment of women's career opportunities. The promotion of part-time work for mothers in dual-earner families can, therefore, be seen as problematic from an equal opportunities perspective.

The gendered nature of care impacted on the feelings some women had when the demands of paid work affected their ability to provide childcare. This was often expressed in terms of guilt. A female government advisor explained: *'I feel guilty towards the children, and guilty towards the person who is ... going to do it'*. According to a female secretary to a family business: *'If you take them to childminders you're taking them to someone else's home and ... you're feeling guilty because you feel like you are dumping them onto somebody else'*. These expressions of guilt reveal the emotional tensions some women feel when making childcare decisions. Such tensions are not wholly recognized in family-related policy as the model of 'rational economic man' predominates (Barlow and Duncan, 2000a; 2000b).

Several issues emerge as a result of the study. Firstly, the interviewee's responses reflected the government's approach in one main respect: that childcare should be ideally provided within the family. This ideal type was, however, challenged by everyday demands of paid and unpaid work, family and leisure, and additional support was sought from a patchwork of formal and informal networks. Dual earning necessitated additional childcare support, but this was not provided by policy; rather it was a case of *'muddling along with what you've got'* according to a male landscape architect.

#### RECONCILING WORK AND HOME

Most of the couples interviewed recognized a need for a balance of work and home life, although the different demands of paid work, domestic work, childcare and a need for leisure presented constant challenges. Many of the interviewees led complex lives that were managed by negotiation between partners and through the use of timetables, calendars, diaries and rotas. Whereas some of the interviewees, such as one male self-employed respondent, did not feel the need to problematize their balance of work and home: *'I haven't had time to think about whether I'm happy with it or not, it's just a case of doing it'*, others expressed a distinct dissatisfaction with their life balance. A female nursery nurse, for example, had taken on a 35.5 hour job after an extended period of short-hours work, and this impacted heavily on the way she felt about her balance of work and home:

*It's a constant struggle. ... I never have time to do all the planning that I need to do, or my school work. I never have time to fit everything into a day, there's just never enough time. I spend less and less time with the family in the evenings, you know as soon as I get home. ... I'm usually doing this sort of stuff [gestures towards paperwork on the table in front of her], my husband doesn't usually get in*

*'til later anyway, and now the children are doing more and more of their own, you know, I'm having to run about and take them places, and we very rarely now sit together in the evenings. There just aren't enough hours in the day to fit everything in.*

Women in particular seemed to experience emotional and physical strain owing to the demands of work and home and the 'second shift' (Hochschild, 1989). When the conflicting demands of work and home could not be reconciled, guilt was again experienced by many, and personal leisure time was often sacrificed. Being flexible about accessing leisure was one method of avoiding feelings of guilt, whilst not totally relinquishing time to oneself. Furthermore, one female project co-ordinator cited such flexibility as a function of gender: *'I have chosen jobs that are flexible, and I've chosen leisure time that's flexible. But I think women generally tend to do that ... you've got to learn to juggle really'*.

Many employees relied on flexible work practices to juggle their day and many of the interviewees took advantage of flexi-time arrangements, for example in order to manage work and home life. They often felt, however, that structures and facilities were not flexible enough to warrant easy access to full-time work for women, and men also complained that they suffered from implicit and explicit pressure to work extended hours. Obstacles to an effective work-home balance included *'a lack of discretion about timetable,'* according to a male researcher and limited access to job options such as job shares and working from home. Male-dominated working environments and a lack of 'progressive' family-friendly policies were also identified as constraining factors. Many employees, therefore, depended on 'accommodating' line managers, and 'unofficial' time off that was 'made up' when required.

These results call into question the value of the New Labour government pursuing policies that are heavily reliant on the voluntary participation of employers. Legislation on parental leave and working time, for example, has been particularly accommodating to the needs of business and require small or no structural and cultural change within organizations. In addition, government's existing reconciliation initiatives do not challenge the gendered nature of policy that acts to reinforce expectations that women will take career breaks, work shorter hours and carry out the majority of unpaid work in the home during the childrearing phase of the lifecourse. Again, policy emerges in the context of a minimalist approach to state intervention in the family and role assumptions based on the breadwinning role of men and the caring role of women.

### **Balancing employment and the rest of life**

Dual-earner families represent a large proportion of families in the UK that did not elicit specific responses in postwar family-related policy until the late 1990s. The postwar legacy of the family as a private institution continues to provide a pervasive backdrop for all family-related policy in the UK. A reappraisal of 'the family' in policy has, however, occurred under the leadership of New Labour, particularly owing to its emphasis on the financial, social and moral importance of employment. New Labour's shifting focus from the 'male-breadwinner' model of family life to an 'adult-worker' model (Lewis, 2001) acts to promote the dual, or more specifically, the one-and-a-half earner model as the normative family-employment configuration of couple households. Policies support this model,

but they are underscored by an expectation that parents will act according to a rational economic agenda. The interviews from the case study revealed the rationales used were more complex than policy suggests. Gendered understandings of what constituted good motherhood particularly impacted on women's childcare and employment decisions.

Despite New Labour's shifting emphasis towards an adult-worker model of family life, policy continues to rely on individuals, and especially women, juggling the different aspects of everyday life. The balance between employment and the rest of life appeared to be a common cause for concern for the interviewees in the case study and an area in which policy could make a significant impact. Fundamental to such policies would be a reappraisal of the value of care work that would mean investment in substantial amounts of high quality childcare and support for parent workers (Rowlingson and Millar, 2002, p. 212). Deeper consideration of what constituted the 'rest of life' would also be required by policy makers whose primary concern has traditionally been the balance between paid work and caring for dependent children. Interviewees revealed family, couple and individual leisure time to be an integrative and important part of their daily lives, and this is often neglected in the work-life balance policy debate.

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## **7. Employment Policy and the Family in the European Union**

*Roberta Guerrina*

The last decade of the twentieth century proved to be a challenging time for the development of employment policies in Europe. The increasing drive for competitiveness forced EU member states to find new ways of restructuring and/or reorganizing the European labour market. This led to various forecasts about the demise of the European welfare model in the face of global economic forces. Increasing demographic pressures and far-reaching changes in the social landscape have strengthened calls for substantive change in policy-making structures and processes. The development of family-friendly policies encompasses all these trends and sheds light on the current transition in European social, economic and welfare structures.

The context for the development of family-friendly policies in Europe is twofold. The Treaty of Amsterdam institutionalized the drive to make employment one of the key pillars of European integration. The European Commission's 1994 White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment advances the main aims of this pillar: employability, adaptability, entrepreneurship and equal opportunities. At the same time, concerns over current demographic trends are becoming an increasingly important factor in policy-making decisions, as confirmed by the Commission's White Paper on European Social Policy, also issued in 1994.

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the development and objectives of EU policies for reconciling work and family life. The discussion focuses on assumptions about family policies, gender roles and the employment relationship currently being structured by EU policies. What emerges from the analysis is uncertainty over the present and future of the European employment model. Gerda Falkner (1998) has sought to address this question in her discussion of the European social dimension. She claims that the European Union is moving towards a corporatist community, whereby social partners are replacing member states' governments at the heart of social policy decisions. This paper seeks to test Falkner's hypothesis with regard to the implications such developments might have on gender structures in Europe.

### **The European context**

Concerns about demographic trends have had a significant impact in bringing the issue of work–life balance onto the political agenda. The decrease in fertility rates has raised many alarm bells about the future economic viability of the European social model. A link that is often cited to explain the dramatic decrease in fertility rates during the postwar era is the increased participation of women in the formal labour market. This connection has prompted EU governments to link employment strategies to family policies. It is within this economic framework that the family is legitimized in the European policy realm. Family-friendly policies, therefore, represent a bridge between family and

employment policy (Hantrais, 1999; McGlynn, 2000; Bagavos and Martin, 2001).

Four main arguments have been cited in support of the development of family-friendly policies by Judith Evans (2001, pp. 24–8). The first is the ‘business case’, which focuses on the economic advantages of adopting this strategy for employers and entrepreneurs. The emphasis here is on retention, morale and productivity. It is an employer rather than employee centred approach, the success of which is dependent upon the ability to generate profit. Although this is proving to be the strongest argument in favour of policy development, it also represents a short-term, one-size-fits-all approach.

The second case revolves around new ‘trends in human resource practices’ (Evans, 2001, pp. 26–7), which seek to engender greater employee commitment towards a particular firm. To achieve this aim, the employer must be seen to make a greater investment in the welfare of employees. According to Evans’ findings, however, this management style has not been adopted uniformly in the EU labour market and is strongly influenced by the attitudes of individual firms. It could be argued that a direct link exists between the overall business benefits of investing in human resources and firms’ involvement in family-friendly programmes. This particular approach is thus merely a development of the original business case argument.

The equal opportunities agenda is the rationale for the third argument. According to Evans (2001, p. 28), ‘in many ways it is natural to link family-friendly policies with gender equity policies’ because of women’s continued care responsibilities in the domestic sphere. However, there are some inherent weaknesses in this approach. Identifying family-friendly policies with gender equality programmes establishes a ‘mommy-track, with lower career prospects’ (Evans, 2001, p. 28). The approach thus reinforces the male breadwinner model and reasserts women’s role as the primary carer in the private sphere. If family-friendly policies are solely women friendly, they fail to challenge gender hierarchies, ultimately adapting but maintaining the current gender order (Bacchi, 1999; Hakim, 2000).

The fourth argument revolves around the restructuring of work patterns that has come about thanks to greater opportunities for homework and flexible employment. As Evans explains:

modern communication technology, including the mobile telephone and the Internet, allows easier and faster communications between off-site employees and their enterprises. This may allow more work to be shifted back to the home, potentially aiding the work/family reconciliation. (Evans, 2001, p. 28)

Although this is an apparently attractive proposal, two problems emerge: firstly, it simply fails to address the issue of care and the gendered allocation of responsibilities in the private sphere; secondly, the sector remains highly unregulated, thus susceptible to abuse (Caracciolo, 2001).

Three key issues are beginning to emerge from this preliminary discussion. Firstly, employers play a crucial role in defining the ultimate success of family-friendly policies. Their participation in the decision-making process is, therefore, essential for the long-term success of these policies. Secondly, policies for reconciling work and family life can only be as successful as the infrastructure established to support them. Finally, employment and family

policy are closely intertwined and thus policy makers have to bridge the current gap between these two policy areas.

### **Strategies for reconciling work and family life**

In the context of the current drive for increased competitiveness, government policies have been the main promoters of work–life balance. Ute Behning and Amparo Serrano Pascual (2001, p. 7) identify three main strategies for reconciling work and family life: ‘the provision of infrastructures by the state for combining work and care, the provision of parental leave arrangements, and the development of new patterns of working time’. As will become apparent in this section, each of these strategies is closely linked with one or more of the rationales presented in the previous section.

One of the main strategies adopted by employers and governments to allow individuals, especially women, to reconcile employment and family responsibilities is flexible employment. The shift from the traditional model of full-time, permanent employment has involved an important change in EU labour politics. This is presented as the best way to ensure the long-term competitiveness of the European market and has been associated with the increased participation of women in the labour force. The reorganization of work can take different forms which, as Juliet Webster (2001, p. 25) explains, can include, among others, ‘part-time working, temporary working, shift working and other forms of non full-time, non-lifetime employment’. Although the change in employment patterns has been welcomed by many employers and policy makers, it has important repercussions for the reproduction of power hierarchies in the labour market. As Evans (2001, p. 22) points out: ‘the figures for voluntary part-time working by women employees, ... show this is likely to be an important part of the work/family reconciliation in a number of European countries’. Similarly, Webster (2001, p. 25) argues that; it ‘can be actively used to implement equality objectives’. However, such policies can also result in further segregation of the labour market and reinforce the male breadwinner model and gender division of labour and care in the private sphere.

In sum, flexible employment provides a great opportunity for individuals to shape employment practices and reconcile employment and family responsibilities. However, such policies cannot be gender blind, as flexible employment is all too often synonymous with part-time, temporary and insecure employment. As Colette Fagan and Brendon Burchell (2002, p. 57) explain, ‘many women seek part-time work when they have young children as one means of reconciling the time demands of mothering and employment, particularly when alternative sources of childcare are scarce’. This analysis points to the need for an approach to the reorganization of work that is gender sensitive and multidimensional, and not driven solely by the interests of employers (Deakin and Reed, 2000; Webster, 2001).

The second strategy that has been developing in the past decade is the expansion and improvement of leave arrangements for family reasons. A key issue with reference to the implementation of leave arrangements is the impact of discontinuity of service on an individual’s career prospects. Although the aim is to provide men and women with legal protection to allow them to fulfil the social function of reproduction, the assumption is that women will take

advantage of these provisions, which can have a negative impact on their career prospects (Ruhm, 1998; Evans, 2001).

Despite the focus in recent years on the extension of parental leave rights to fathers, the gender dimension to these policies still needs to be addressed. Even in the Scandinavian countries, men's take-up rates for paternity and parental leave remain low. Leave for family reasons, particularly when associated with childcare issues is still perceived as women's responsibility (Ruhm, 1998; Bacchi, 1999; Hakim, 2000).

The final strategy currently deployed for reconciling work and family life involves the provision of care, which is at the heart of the debate about work-life balance. The main focus is the development of childcare networks, whereby parents (especially women) can access affordable childcare, including publicly funded services, childcare tokens, employers' sponsored crèches and nurseries, payment to grandparents and after-school clubs (Bacchi, 1999, pp. 130–7).

In recent years, scholars and policy makers have come to understand that increased provision of care is an intrinsic part of family-friendly policies. Behning and Serrano Pascual's (2001, pp. 7–8) study of publicly funded care led them to three controversial conclusions. Firstly, publicly funded care services are constrained by the limitations of national social security systems; secondly, women's increased expectations for employment, coupled with lack of public childcare facilities, has resulted in decreased birth rates; thirdly, they fail to challenge the male breadwinner/worker model. These conclusions question some of the assumptions about gender divisions of labour in the private sphere that underpin current discourse, and which need to be addressed individually.

Firstly, the financial impact on social security systems of developing a publicly funded childcare network draws attention to the economic value and importance of unpaid work, mainly by women, in the private sphere. Secondly, discussion of falling birth rates concerns the context within which 'family-friendly' policies have entered the policy-making arena. Researchers remain divided as to impact of public policies on fertility rates. However, it is interesting to note that the EU member states most affected by the recent drop in birth rates are those with low provision of public childcare (Eurostat, 2001). Clearly, it is difficult to establish a causal link between these two trends, particularly as a wide array of social, cultural and economic factors interact to determine individuals' fertility choices. Moreover, the availability of childcare services also interacts with women's position in the labour market and their access to higher wages (Kay, 2000). The issue has, however, helped to focus attention on the conflict between work and family duties. Childcare provision alone will not challenge gender hierarchies in the public and private sphere's, where childrearing continues to be the mother's responsibility. The question of care thus remains an important and unresolved issue.

### **Family and employment structures: the missing link in European policy**

European integration is rooted in the process of economic co-operation, which culminated in the establishment of the Single Market in 1992. Family policy has

not been an obvious candidate for EU integration. However, as Clare McGlynn (2000, p. 224) explains, 'despite the lack of a distinct legal basis for Community regulation of families it is unrealistic to believe that the EU's activities will remain wholly divorced from any consideration of these issues'. From the 1960s, EU family policy sought to regulate the free movement of workers families, on the grounds that the mobile worker was the male breadwinner (Ackers, 1998; Hantrais, 2000; McGlynn, 2000).

One of the most striking features of family policy at EU level is its minimalist and inherently gendered nature. The development of this policy area has two distinct features. Firstly, it depends on what McGlynn (2000, p. 224) calls the 'model European family'. Secondly, it expands the concept of family law because of the legal remit associated with European integration. More specifically, the development of European family law has been justified by linking economic/employment policy and family policy (Hantrais, 2000; McGlynn, 2000; Walby, 1997).

The link between family policy and employment structures has been institutionalized as a response to changes in family dynamics. Two related trends have been identified in this paper: the marked increase in women's participation in the official labour market; and the dramatic fall in fertility rates. This points to an increased tension that individuals, and particularly women, experience in reconciling employment and family responsibilities. As Christos Bagavos and Claude Martin (2001) explain:

in the last 20 years there has been a shift in European markets towards a more liberal market-based employment model. This shift, combined with the persistence of a division between public and private life has had important repercussions for the social function of reproduction. (Bagavos and Martin, 2001, pp.16–17)

As they further argue, the challenge facing European institutions and governments today is how to maintain the predominance of a liberal market-based economic policy, involving low intervention and regulation, while supporting the social function of reproduction. Although the division between public and private spheres is at the heart of liberal economics, feminists have long argued that such a division is not only short sighted, but also ignores the importance and contributions of the private sphere to the overall success of the market. This is particularly relevant for the role of families as providers of care and, therefore, as the unrecognized arm of welfare systems in Europe (Elson, 1994; Lewis, 1993; Pascall, 1997)

Clearly, family and employment policy has a gender dimension that has long been recognized by feminist scholars but is just starting to enter mainstream economic and political discourse. Most importantly, the rationale behind its inclusion is not some kind of equality agenda, but wider concerns about the future survival of the European social model and, perhaps most importantly, the European labour market.

Current discussions about reorganizing the European labour market could provide an invaluable opportunity for mainstreaming the equal opportunity agenda in a way that seeks to address the power hierarchies present in the public and private spheres. As Webster's study found, 'it is a general rule that policies for modernizing work organization and those for addressing equal

opportunities are rarely talked about in the same breath' (Webster, 2001, p. 8). This is a valuable insight as it allows us to uncover the 'real' agenda behind family-friendly discourse, namely increased competitiveness.

### **EU policies for reconciling work and family life**

When discussing the development of 'family-friendly' policies in the EU, it is important to note that they have all been ratified in the post-Maastricht era. This is significant for three reasons: firstly, the 1990s were marked by a sharp increase in women's employment rates. Secondly, the business drive towards an increasingly globalized economy and the permanent shift of the European labour market towards a knowledge and service-based economy further heightened calls for restructuring to maintain competitiveness. Finally, the introduction of the social dialogue under the terms of the Agreement on Social Policy created a new avenue for policy development that could by-pass the reluctance of governments to regulate this particular policy area (European Commission, 2001; Falkner, 1998; Rubery *et al.*, 1999).

Reconciliation between work and family life has been institutionalized at the EU level through a series of binding agreements and soft laws, the most important of which are: the parental leave directive (96/34/EC), the pregnant worker directive (92/85/EEC), the working time directive (93/104/EEC), the part-time/atypical work directive (97/81/EC), and the childcare recommendation (92/241/EEC).

In chronological order, the pregnant worker directive was the first to be ratified by the Council of Ministers in 1992. The main rights established are: minimum period of leave (14 weeks); protection against dismissal; clear health and safety guidelines; and regulation of night work. The justification was the protection of the health and safety of the mother and child rather than equal opportunities or a commitment to family-friendly policies.

The parental leave directive extends the right to care leave to men. Accordingly, both men and women are entitled to six months (three months each, non-transferable) parental leave to be used before the child's eighth birthday. Unlike the case of the pregnant worker directive, which could be seen as having been forced on member states as a health and safety measure, the parental leave negotiations were led and completed by the social partners. Whereas the first directive was an example of top-down policy, the second exemplifies a new trend in EU decision making that favours bottom-up (business-led) policy-making structures over binding regulations.

Although welcomed as a positive step towards the development of affordable childcare, the childcare recommendation has also been criticized for lacking legal bite. The aim was to build consensus around the need for affordable childcare, but it did not promote transfer of good practice between member states.

The working time directive falls under the broad umbrella of reconciliation between work and family life because it seeks to address the impact of the long-hours work culture on social dynamics in Europe. As Fagan and Burchell (2002) explain,

national working time regulations, and...the EU working time directive are designed to promote the quality of working life through setting upper limits on the volume of working hours. This is a recognition of the negative impact that long working hours have on the workers' health and safety, the safety of their customers in some sectors of activity, and on the coordination of the time demands of employment with family life. (Fagan and Burchell, 2002, p. 57)

As the same authors further comment, this shift has had clear implications for the ability of workers to reconcile public and private responsibilities, which is particularly important because, as their data shows, the segregation of the labour market forces women down to the lower echelons of the employment hierarchies, thus reducing their opportunities to influence working hours and conditions. Ultimately, working hours are the prime culprit in the dichotomization between employment and family life, a rationalization of working time would, therefore, have a significant impact on the success of family-friendly policies (Fagan and Burchell, 2002, pp. 63–4).

Another development that is directly related to working hours and conditions is the atypical work directive, which was also ratified under the auspices of the social dialogue and aims to establish the principle of equality of treatment for workers regardless of conditions of employment. It thus seeks to regulate the overall quality of the work experience for the growing number of part-time workers. The negotiations leading up to the signing of the agreement highlight the emerging conflict between the interests of employers for deregulation and of the labour force for equality of treatment and security. What is also starting to transpire from these dichotomized positions are two divergent interpretations of the concept of flexibility. From the position of the employers, flexibility equals deregulation, whereas from the labour side it means flexibility of working time (Deakin and Reed, 2000; Falkner, 1998).

Taken together, these policies target all three strategies outlined by Webster (2001). They afford clear-cut regulations on the administration of maternity rights and parental leave, and part-time workers now have a set of rights under EU law. The working time directive was perhaps the most innovative policy in seeking to address the impact of long working hours on family dynamics and the gender division of labour in the private sphere. Lack of clarity and legal loopholes have served to undermine the radical potential of this particular directive (Adnett and Hardy, 2001). The recognition that affordable and easily accessible childcare is a key to achieving some kind of work–life balance is very important. However, the fact that this provision remains in the form of a recommendation highlights the unwillingness of governments to develop a comprehensive set of regulations in this particular policy area.

### **Emerging trends**

A striking feature in the development of family-friendly policies in Europe has been the role played by the social partners. The introduction of the Agreement on Social Policy proved to be a bold and innovative move. The increasing use made of the social dialogue has led some scholars to argue that the Union is adapting a new employment model based on the principles of collective bargaining (Bercusson, 1996; Falkner, 1998).

Falkner (1998) takes the European works council, parental leave and atypical work directives as case studies in the analysis of a European social dimension based on the principles of corporatism. She shows that this policy area is particularly suited to the process of social dialogue and has advantages in such a potentially sensitive policy area for all parties concerned. Governments are able to delegate responsibility for regulation to the social partners, thus working towards the deregulation of the market, while allowing for the representation of the interests of workers. The question that emerges is whether this is the best way forward for the long-term success of family-friendly policies.

The main strength of the social dialogue is that it encompasses various forms of multilevel governance that have become entrenched in the European policy-making process. It can be seen as combining the weight of a regulatory approach with the flexibility of bottom-up policy making. Most importantly, the approach is based on a combination of 'soft' and 'hard' laws. The introduction of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) at the Lisbon Summit in 2000 further emphasized this shift towards the deregulation of policy making in the social field and the possible impact of soft laws options. The main aim of the OMC is to shift the policy-making process away from regulations towards benchmarking and best practice. This has clear advantages, insofar as it by-passes the lengthy European decision-making process, but it is a compromise in favour of soft rather than hard laws (de la Porte, 2002, pp. 38–40).

The social partners continue to play an important role in the development and implementation of employment policies in most EU member states. As Brian Bercusson (1996, p. 179) explains with reference to equal opportunities policies, 'if most workers in the EU experience the EU law on sex equality only through the collective bargaining activity of employers and trade unions, it is that context which really determines the application of EU law'. A similar rationale can be applied to family-friendly policies, whereby, if social partners are going to be directly involved in the implementation process at national level, it follows that they should be at the heart of the decision-making process at the EU level. As he further explains:

It is clear that the social partners may play a positive role in the pursuit of equality through collective bargaining. It should be noted, however, also that collective bargaining may pose problems for achieving that objective. Collective bargaining is itself a gendered process and collective agreements may reflect, embody or perpetuate discriminatory practices. (Bercusson, 1996, p. 183)

Bercusson's final comment goes to the heart of the criticism of the new European social model. Collective agreements and interest representation, rather than promotion of best practice, may become an efficient way of sidelining controversial policy areas. Two specific criticisms can be raised against each strategy. Interest representation is, by its very definition, biased and all too often incorporates and recreates gender hierarchies (Bercusson, 1996, p. 183). The OMC, on the other hand, is faced with important issues of transferability, particularly with reference to best practice. Moreover, adherence to the principles established through benchmarking and monitoring are subject to the good will of the policy actors involved.

## Challenges and policy outcomes

Several challenges emerge from this shift in policy focus. Is a bottom-up approach to policy making the best way forward for gender policy areas? Can the aims of the social partners and the economic interests they represent be reconciled with a greater need for the social survival of the welfare state? What links are emerging between employment policies, gender roles, family structures and the economic interests of the EU as a whole? As Bercusson (1996, pp. 182–6) points out, employers are in a unique position because they can implement innovative and potentially radical programmes. They could, therefore, become the primary actors in creating a fairer work environment. The interests of employers are, however, all too often in conflict with equal opportunities. This misalignment has important repercussions for the long-term success and continued application of these same policies. What emerges from the discussion above is that the social dialogue is perhaps the best way forwards because it combines the positive policy drive generated through collective bargaining with the strengths of European regulatory structures. The introduction of the OMC has re-ignited the debate as to whether European regulation is the best way forward for the development of a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to reconciling work and family life.

Evans' (2001) research on the contributions of firms to the establishment of a family-friendly work environment points to the need to bring together top-down regulation with better information for employers about the business benefits of family-friendly policies. Once again we can see that the main driving force for firms and employers is the business case, which leads to the main criticism of an interest led bottom-up approach: if economic benefits for employers are the main reason for the adoption of family-friendly policies, we can also assume that, once the business case ceases to exist, the market will also cease to support such policies, thereby leading to discontinuity of provision. As Evans explains:

At the micro level, research suggests that many firms are unaware of the business benefits that can be reaped by adopting a more family-friendly stance. Small firms may be unduly concerned that the take-up rate of family-friendly arrangements could be so high as to cause unacceptable operating difficulties. Governments may thus be able to play a role by disseminating information about the potential advantages, as well as offering technical advice on how to introduce family-friendly arrangements successfully. (Evans, 2001, p. 31)

This analysis highlights the many divergent interests within the market. Given the difference in the economic rationale of small and large firms, it would be disingenuous to assume that business interests will become the driving force behind such far-reaching restructuring of the employment market.

The business approach also fails to account for the variety of other social and political interests and forces interacting with the labour market. As outlined in the introduction, one of the main socio-political concerns in contemporary European society is the dramatic decrease in birth rates. The fall in fertility has repercussions for the future viability of the European social model. Two interrelated reasons explain why European demographic trends are undergoing such a downturn. Firstly, the last 50 years have been marked by a change in

women's aspirations, particularly to their participation in the labour market. Secondly, European welfare and employment structures were founded on the male breadwinner model, which relies on the separation between the public and the private spheres. More specifically, the model relies on women's role as carers, resulting in a dichotomization between economic and private/family interests. The analysis presented here shows that employment policies must become an integral part of any long-term solution to the crisis in fertility rates. As Bagavos and Martin (2001, p. 22) argue, 'employment policies are nowadays among the main options of effectively intervening in fertility levels and achieving replacement fertility in Europe'.

This discussion leads to the main conclusion of the paper. That regulation is necessary for the long-term success of family-friendly policies. European institutions are in a particularly advantageous position to take responsibility for such policies. A move in this direction does not preclude interaction between the interests of social partners, national and local authorities, as well as small and large firms. However, EU institutions and national governments must be the main actors in developing the necessary infrastructure for the long-term success of policies allowing men and women to reconcile work and family life (Behnig and Serrano Pascual, 2001; Caracciolo, 2001). This point is particularly relevant when looking at the persistence of structural impediments to achieving equal opportunities for men and women. Although employers have to be included in the policy-making process because they are the main implementation agents, it is important that progress is monitored by external agencies representing wider interests (Fagan and Burchell, 2002). They concluded in the 2000 Gender and Employment Survey conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working conditions that obstacles still remain in the labour market that make it difficult for women to enter or advance in many of the higher status and better paid areas of employment, and similarly deter men from entering 'non-traditional' female dominated areas of employment. Progress to reduce these obstacles has been made in the development of equal treatment legislation, and the implementation of formal organisation 'equal opportunities' policies, but further reform is required to strengthen the legislation and to promote good practice in organisations. It has also become increasingly apparent from research and monitoring within organisations that it is important to tackle some of the more subtle or deep-rooted organisational practices and cultures that perpetuate gender inequalities. (Fagan and Burchell, 2002, p. 28).

Reconciling work and family life, particularly with reference to care duties in the private domain, remains a gendered issue, which is still perceived as a duty or responsibility of women. Beyond this, it is also clear that firms alone will not implement a far-reaching equal opportunities agenda that will influence demographic trends and reshape social structures.

Institutions such as the public childcare infrastructure, the structure of the education system, ...the public infrastructure of long-term care facilities for elderly persons, the distribution of non-labour income within social and family policy systems (e.g. maternity leave benefits), ... and the tax system ... have a significant effect on the labour market behaviours of the various family members. (Muehlberger, 2000, p. 13)

This analysis raises three important issues: firstly, significant differences exist in the application of the principles enshrined within EU regulations at the national level. Secondly, regulations continue to play an important role in creating the overall framework for the application of a far-reaching policy agenda. They also provide a point of reference for employers and employees. Thirdly, it shows that the European family model is still strongly based on the male breadwinner. Nonetheless,

the interaction of the social reproduction system, the economic reproduction system and the system of governance determine the level and structure of women's labour market participation. (Muehlberger, 2000, p. 16)

It is, therefore, possible to claim that, despite current limitations, family-friendly policies have succeeded in formally introducing the private sphere in the economic realm.

The introduction of regulations on parental leave, maternity rights and part-time work have clearly strengthened the position of women within the economic and legal framework of member states. Although EU regulations have come under a lot of criticisms, due to the perceived imposition of rules on a market that is increasingly seeking to de-regulate, they have provided a context for the development of a more inclusive work culture. The impact of this culture on the effectiveness of family-friendly policies has led to an increased awareness of the importance of the business case in ensuring that employers display a greater degree of commitment towards such policies. Finally, the analysis in this paper suggests that the best way forward for family-friendly policies is a multidimensional approach that includes the social partners and seeks to address both the economic concerns of employers and the overall objectives of equal opportunities and social justice. Ultimately, any approach that is to be effective has to include a long-term strategy that will allow policy makers to address pressing issues of competitiveness and will not increase the tension between economic production and social reproduction. The EU framework is perhaps the best place to develop such policies because it is a system of multilevel governance and thus allows for multidimensional strategies.

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