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Jane Lewis

Work, Care, Gender Equality and the Problem of 'Instrumental' Social Policies

By 2000, the traditional male breadwinner model family was substantially eroded throughout the European Union, although to different extents. In north-western Europe, the increase in women's employment – not matched by an increase in men's carework and housework – has resulted in the emergence of a 'one-and-a-half' or 'one-and-three-quarters' breadwinner model. Men work full-time and women work varying numbers of part-time hours, with a large amount of carework remaining informal. In southern Europe, part-time work is rare and women tend to polarise between working full-time or not working at all. The Nordic countries are now close to a full-time, dual-earner family model, supported by the state via paid parental leaves and extensive formal care services, though with women still working shorter hours than their male partners. These changes in male and female contributions to families have arguably resulted in 'new social needs and demands, labelled "new social risks"' (Bonoli, 2005: 431) – notably, reconciling or combining work and care – which now constitute a challenge common to all European welfare states.

This challenge has long been recognised and addressed by governments in the Nordic countries and in some Western European countries, especially France and to some extent Belgium. In the last decade even countries like the UK, which has historically had little by way of explicit family policies, have begun to implement policies such as provision for childcare, leave for parents and more flexible working hours, while work/family reconciliation policies have also become part of the political agenda at the EU level. However, the policy aims, both at member state level and at EU level, have often had relatively little to do with the welfare of family members, particularly in terms of gender equality, although there has been more concern expressed in many member states about children's welfare and development. Rather, the main focus has been the promotion of economic growth and competitiveness, with the result that policies to address what amounts to a 'care squeeze' (Ellingsaeter and Leira, 2006), have been 'instrumental' and insufficiently care-centred.[1] I use the development of work/family balance policies at the EU level to illustrate this argument.

[1] I draw here on a number of pieces of work that elaborate my arguments more fully: in particular, Lewis (2001, 2002, 2006).

The trend in all western welfare states has been towards a re-working of the relationship between social provision and employment. Indeed, in many respects it can be argued that EU institutions have been pushing at an open door in respect of reform to achieve 'active' rather than 'passive' welfare reform (Wincott, 2003, see also Gilbert, 2002). The development of the European Employment Strategy in particular has been crucial in this regard. Employment policy has become the major preoccupation of social policy, in order to secure the viability of the work/welfare relationship, and of economic policy in order to promote competition and growth. As the High Level Group reviewing the Lisbon Strategy put it, the aim has been to 'embed' Europe's commitment to social cohesion 'in the core of the growth and jobs generation process' (High Level Group, 2004, p.16). Social policy has become 'employment-led' (O'Connor, 2005).

But what is particularly striking about the re-working of the work/welfare relationship is the way in which it has been couched in gender neutral language. It is now assumed that women as well as men will be 'citizen workers' (Lewis, 2002; Lewis and Giullari, 2005) in an 'adult worker model family'. Indeed, over the last decade the Commission has increasingly stressed the importance of the effective use of women's skills in a competitive, knowledge-based economy (Commission, 2000), and has received academic backing for its position; women being seen as an untapped labour reserve (Esping Andersen et al., 2001). The 2000 Lisbon Council set a target of 60 per cent for female labour market participation in Member States by 2010, and the following year the Stockholm Council set an interim target of 57 per cent by 2005. The hours of women's work remain unspecified, and in many Western European countries a modified male breadwinner model – that is, a one-and-a-half-earner model – has become the norm. In relation to social policy, gender equality was defined more in terms of levels of labour market participation than anything else. Indeed, the gender pay gap – the original focus of EU level equal opportunities legislation – has persisted.

Work/Family Reconciliation Policy at the EU Level

The commitment to equal opportunities in the form of equal pay for men and women in the 1957 Treaty of Rome effectively became one of the European community's main commitments to social policy. This was a measure that lay outside the established contours of social policy development in twentieth century western European welfare states, which built their systems of social protection around the relationship between the male worker and the labour market – the work/welfare relationship (Supiot, 1999). However, in fact, the commitment to equal pay at the European level was closely linked to the central preoccupation with the work/welfare relationship, in that the main concern (on the part of the French Government) was to create an 'equal playing field' to ensure fair competition (Szyszczak, 2000). Thus gender equality, which has been an important goal at the EU level, has been historically linked as much to the pursuit of market-making as to social justice.

The notion of 'reconciliation', has usually been couched in gender neutral language

and has often been taken to mean the 'harmonization' of paid and unpaid work for women, rather than 'harmonization' in the sense of equal sharing between men and women at the household level. Nevertheless, most of the key documents on work/family reconciliation issued during the early and mid-1990s made explicit reference somewhere, if only in passing, to the desirability of men and women "sharing employment and family responsibilities". In 1992, a Council Recommendation was issued on childcare (Council, 1992), urging member states to develop and/or encourage initiatives to 'enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children'. The Recommendation also defined childcare broadly and proposed that measures were needed in four areas: childcare services, leave for employed parents, family-friendly policies at the workplace, and measures to promote increased participation by men in the care and upbringing of children. Even the 1994 White Paper on Social Policy, which endorsed the need for higher 'adult' labour market participation, referred also to the need for 'greater solidarity between men and women' at the same time as it prioritised the role of social policies in promoting women's employment (Commission, 1994, p.43).

In 1996 a Directive on Parental Leave (Council,1996) was adopted, which laid down minimum individual rights to three months parental leave for men and women; member states were left to determine the conditions of access, whether the leave should be compensated and whether it should be full- or part-time. The leave was to be non-transferable – fathers could not transfer it to mothers – in order to promote gender equality. However, the fact that no minimum remuneration requirements were specified (a victory for the employer's side) made it much less likely that men would take it (as proved to be the case, Bruning and Plantenga, 1999), and that it would in practice be reconciliation for women.

Since the late 1990s, there has been a significant change in the way in which work/family reconciliation policies have been framed. As the then Social Affairs Commissioner, Padraig Flynn, commented in his foreword to the Employment and Social Affairs Directorate's 1998 report on reconciliation, the issue 'is an integral part of the European Employment Strategy process' (Commission, 1998). From 1998, work/family reconciliation has been more firmly integrated into the Guidelines accompanying the European Employment Strategy (EES), with the result that first, the goal of promoting gender equality by changing the behaviour of men has increasingly slipped out of the picture, and second, the policy focus has focused more on the provision of childcare services, which are more likely to promote female labour market participation than measures – such as long homecare leaves - that provide time to care. Both Germany and the UK have created about 600,000 childcare places since 1996/7 (Evers et al., 2005). The desire to increase women's labour market participation (especially of lone mothers in the UK), as well as, to a somewhat lesser extent, to improve early learning, has proved a powerful spur to laggard member states, but one that does not necessarily have much to do with the promotion of gender equality *per se* (Stratigaki,2004).

Arguments for the need to reform 'work organisation' by increasing flexibility, in

which the provision of childcare was recognised to play a part, were made without any reference to equal opportunities (e.g. Commission, 1997; Webster, 2001). This is significant because work/family reconciliation became increasingly tied to the new desire to prioritise flexibility and security, and an important component of the commitment to 'social quality' at work (Commission, 2001). By increasing 'quality in work' it was hoped to increase productivity, and by increasing the attractiveness of work, to raise the employment rate of women (ibid, p.8). In 2003, work/family reconciliation was included under the 'quality and productivity' objective in the EES Guidelines (Council, 2003), the equal opportunities pillar, under which it had appeared from 1998 (Council, 1998), having been abolished as gender equality became a 'horizontal principle' to be 'mainstreamed' across all policy fields. There is therefore a danger that gender equality in the sense of 'equal sharing' between men and women will be given reduced priority (Rubery, 2002).

During the late 1990s, the Commission argued that 'the new gender balance in working life is at odds with traditional family policies' and reform was viewed as part of the modernisation of social protection (Commission, 1997a). Esping Andersen, who co-authored an influential policy document for the Belgian presidency in 2001 went further in his indictment of the 'familialism' of the old welfare settlement, arguing that policies based on assumptions regarding the traditional roles of men and women in families are now the 'Achilles' heel' of welfare states, running counter to both family formation and labour supply and, with their low levels of female employment, reducing the tax base necessary to sustain the continental European social welfare system (Esping Andersen, 1999, p.70). The setting of targets for women's employment by the Lisbon Council was followed by the 2002 Barcelona Council setting targets for the provision of childcare services to reach 90 per cent of children between three and school age and 33 per cent of under three's.

These targets were notable first, for the explicit narrowing of the rationale for childcare to women's employment levels and of the policy focus on childcare services. Second, they specified the means by which member states should reach the Lisbon target for female employment, which represented a substantial restriction of the understanding of childcare (to formal, institutional provision) compared to the 1992 Recommendation. Jill Rubery (the chair of the Commission's Gender and Employment Expert Group) concluded that the areas of greatest impact on the EES in respect of gender equality were those that were most consistent with the main aims and objectives of the Strategy, particularly childcare (Rubery, 2002). At the end of 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, employment became the dominant (economic and social) policy frame and Rubery's conclusion echoes the importance that other commentators on EU level policy have attached to it. The priority accorded childcare services, which provide unequivocal incentives to women's employment, rather than leave, which, if it is long (more than twelve months) and poorly compensated, acts to encourage female labour market exit, is significant in this regard.

Work/family reconciliation policies have long been a part of the EU's mainstream concern about economic policy and access to labour markets. But in the early and mid-

1990s they were clearly nested within equal opportunities policies as well as employment policies. Ostner (2000) argued that the 1992 Recommendation on childcare was mainly about employment, but this was much less so than was the case with the 2002 Barcelona targets. One of the main issues regarding the mainstreaming of equality concerned the tension between gender equality and the (male) mainstream, and the danger of weakening the commitment to gender equality. This seems to have been substantially realised in respect of the EES Guidelines, which dropped their specific equal opportunities pillar in 2003. A similar issue arises in respect of work/family reconciliation as it is increasingly absorbed into employment policy. The Swedish Presidency documents of 2001 represented this problem in terms of the long-established Swedish approach: that women and men should be treated the same (as citizen workers), but that women should be compensated until such time as equality in the labour market was actually achieved (EU, 2001a,b). However, the more instrumental treatment of work/family reconciliation as part of the dominant employment agenda has proved threatening to the goal of gender equality. Women's labour market participation rates have indeed risen. As a result, the Report from the Commission to the Spring European Council in 2004 focused much more strongly on securing a rise in employment for older workers (Commission, 2004), while the High Level Group on the Future of Social Policy in an enlarged European Union continued to promote reconciliation, but mainly as a means of allowing couples 'to have the number of children they desire' (Commission, 2004a; see also Commission, 2005). It is not clear that hitching reconciliation to the challenge of falling fertility will do any more for the pursuit of gender equality than the strong link to employment has done.

Thus, policy developments in this field have appeared to be instrumental: they seemed to serve first and foremost the agendas of competition, growth and the budgetary implications of the worsening dependency ratio - more than family welfare, child wellbeing, parental choice or gender equality *per se*. Futhermore, instrumentalism seemed to intensify after the mid-term report on the Lisbon Strategy (High Level Group, 2004). As a recent Commission consultation document on extending EU legislation on leaves, care services and working time states: 'In March 2006 the European Council stressed the need for a better work-private life balance in order to achieve economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness and [to this end] approved the European Pact for Gender Equality' (EC, 2006: Introduction; see also Fagan et al., 2006).

Conclusion: The Need for a More Care-Centred Approach

Work/family reconciliation policies have moved away from their clear association with equal opportunities policies in the early and mid-1990s, to a much more unequivocal, instrumental link to employment policies. Does this matter?

In large measure what we have is evidence of gender equality defined primarily in terms of labour market participation, with diminishing attention to promoting the equal sharing of unpaid care work between men and women and to changing the behaviour of men. It is an irony that just as gender equality established itself institutio-

nally within EU policy making in terms of positive discrimination and most recently a major extension of anti-discrimination law, its meaning shifted such that it became an instrument of the wider agenda on employment and economic growth. The development of policies to address care is important pragmatically, given assumptions that there will be more self-provisioning on the part of all adults (for example, in respect of pensions), male and female, and given the challenges posed by ageing and low fertility. It is also important ethically, in terms of human needs and gender justice. The danger of addressing care issues solely as pragmatic considerations is that care policies tend to be treated as secondary and in relation to *other* policy issues. We need to put the analysis of care in the centre of the stage in order to see what kinds of policies in terms of cash transfers, services and time are necessary, and to understand the direction in which specific policies, such as parental leave should be fine-tuned (e.g., in relation to compensation rates, the amount of leave offered, and the nature of male and female entitlements). The content of specific policies together with the nature of the 'policy package', have major implications in terms of the nature of the 'real' choices that men and women are able to make.

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