

**Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies**

Reconciling Work and Family.  
Impact on Gender and Family

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## **Gender Programme**

The Gender Studies Programme was established in the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in October 2000, building on more than a decade of work in this field at the Institute. The programme's general aims are to support and to help develop the scholarly work of research students, fellows, academic staff and visitors in the study of gender, and to stimulate interdisciplinary work across the departments of the EUI. The programme holds regular seminars and workshops organised around various themes. The main themes to date have included: Gender Studies – The State of the Art, Women in/and the Law, Welfare states and social policy, Feminist Economics, Masculinities, Migration, 'Race', and Identity. Subjects and themes vary over time depending on the interests of those involved in the Programme. In addition, The Ursula Hirschmann Annual Lecture Series on Gender and Europe seeks to promote and develop an understanding of how gender is linked with European issues, as well as an idea of Europe which recognises differences, amongst which gender. An EC-funded research project in the area of Gender and Migration is the primary focus of the research activities of the programme. The programme was directed by Professor Luisa Passerini from October 2000 to June 2002 and co-ordinated by Dawn Lyon. From July 2002 Professor Silvana Sciarra becomes Director of the Gender Studies Programme.



## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the issue of reconciling working and family life in the context where important social and economic transformations have contributed to the growing significance of access to employment as a key welfare indicator. It critically assesses the convergence between feminist and mainstream literature regarding the importance attributed to female employment. The paper looks at the different institutional frameworks for the development of measures to reconcile work and family, focusing on patterns of divergence and divergence in the post-industrial economies. Finally, the paper also considers the implications of the new policy framework for substantive gender equality, outlining a number of issues to consider for further empirical research.

## INTRODUCTION

Much of contemporary sociological and policy research claims that the principles under which democratic welfare states were first created have been deeply transformed. Changes at the socio-economic, political and even cultural levels have introduced new types of risks and needs while transforming old ones. The processes of globalisation and economic internationalisation – which engender increased mobility of capital and labour, trends towards greater liberalisation, and the rise of new technologies- have supposedly affected national economies, while processes of supranational governance have shifted the political boundaries of decision-making and policy intervention.

In this context, the changing nature of work and the new gender balance are two of the most significant factors challenging the organisation of established welfare states. The foundation stone of the welfare state, that is, the strict gender division of labour between the public sphere of work and the private sphere of the family is no longer tenable. Both components of the division have changed profoundly. On the one hand, the “job for life” has been replaced by a more fragmented and diverse pattern of employment. On the other hand, the traditional image of the protective family has blurred both as a symbol of identity and as an effective institution of welfare provision. To be sure, this is not to argue that we are today witnessing a completely unprecedented phenomenon. Just as there is not strong evidence that the transformation effects of globalisation processes have so radically undermined the basis of politics in long-established social partnerships (see Goldthrope 2001), the erosion of traditional patterns of employment and family arrangements might be much more limited than is often presumed. In the industrialised world, the male breadwinner model has always varied widely both in cross-national comparisons and over time. Nevertheless, in many ways these long-established patterns are still in force. As Crouch (1999:67) points out, the “mid-century compromise”, which established the segregation of genders between the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of work, is in many senses not transcended but reproduced at a different institutional location.

Nonetheless, the changes in the nature of employment and traditional family roles have been the driving force behind many of the revisions made at the policy level and at the level of political discourse. The direct policy implication of these changes has been the claim for a more employment-oriented and individualised organisation of welfare that supersedes previous modes of understanding social rights and obligations. According to recent EU reports<sup>1</sup>, this reorganisation, which acknowledges the need to find a balance between employment flexibility and employment security, requires the creation of more

active labour market policies and more opportunities for individuals to get into or go back to work. Measures that aim to reconcile working and family life are a fundamental component of policy reorientation.

However, the new conceptual framework for the above-mentioned transformations and policy responses has yet to be determined. How is work defined? How are the new forms of social integration articulated? What are the implications in terms of equality and equal opportunities? As I will argue, the current social organisation of work should not be articulated simply in terms of transfers between unpaid and paid work. Instead, it involves a much more profound debate that considers how the distribution of resources, provisions, and incentives are allocated among the state, market, and family, and on how they impact the personal arrangement of “productive” and “unproductive” time. Although the *issue* of women’s independence and autonomy from the domestic sphere is relevant from the political, social and even economic points of view, the *solution* is not as straightforward as the increase in female employment rates and the implementation of policies to reconcile work and family might suggest. The concept of gender equality still needs closer scrutiny.

This paper will first evaluate the issue of reconciling work and family in the current context where fundamental transformations in the socio-economic environment and in the organisation of personal life have contributed to the growing significance of access to employment as a welfare indicator. It will then consider the implications of this new policy framework for substantive gender equality, outlining a number of issues to consider for further empirical research.

## **FROM DEPENDENCY TO AUTONOMY: A NEW ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR WELFARE STATE STUDIES**

The single most fundamental critique that feminist scholars have made against mainstream analyses of welfare states concerns the exclusive attention the analyses give to the market-state nexus, with no acknowledgement at all of the relevance of the family in shaping the inputs and outcomes of welfare programmes. The concept of de-commodification (Esping Andersen 1990), which has been one of the most successful indicators for measuring the quality of social rights, has proved highly problematic for women in two main respects. First of all, it measures the degree of independence from the labour market on the assumption that commodification (participation in the labour market) on a standard and full-time basis is the norm for all individuals. The category fails to acknowledge the extent to which women already operate in the “decommodified” domestic sphere, and the extent to which their involvement in that sphere makes possible the “commodification” of labour in the first place (Clarke and Cochrane 1993). Furthermore, the fundamental idea behind this

concept, that the potential of social policy can best be measured by looking at an individual's degree of independence from the labour market, is based on "the assumption that attachment to the labour market is the norm for all citizens and ignores the material and social reality of women, for whom a weakening of personal dependence through employment is an emancipatory step (Meyer 1994: 81). Secondly, de-commodification, like most indicators used in mainstream analyses, only pays attention to transfer payments while ignoring the relevance of other spheres of the welfare state. Yet, the nexus between the state, the market and the family consists not only of social provisions in cash, but also of other welfare mechanisms such as provisions in kind, taxation and social services. The tax system is an important instrument states use to promote certain family arrangements and relationships within families. The different taxation mechanisms can reward or penalise women's work outside the home. State provision of in-kind benefits is also a fundamental component of the welfare state that affects the link between the market and the family in a crucial way.

Hence, when the goal is to appraise the impact of public policies on gender relations and vice versa, the Gordian knot becomes finding gender dimensions based on an understanding of gender interests. To this end, several authors (Orloff 1993; Bussemaker 1994; O'Connor 1993) have attempted to modify or add to concepts –such as independence from the labour market- that have been fundamental to mainstream theories. Orloff suggests the incorporation of two new dimensions, *access to paid work* and *the capacity to form and maintain an autonomous household*, with Esping-Andersen's concept of de-commodification. Orloff starts from the premise that commodification is potentially emancipatory for women and, therefore, the concept of de-commodification needs "a new analytic dimension that taps into the extent to which states promote or discourage women's paid employment and the right to be commodified" (Orloff 1993: 318). Thus, given the "pre-commodified" status of many women and the very weak attachment to the labour market of many others, an indicator capable of measuring access to work is in order. That is, for women, commodification and not de-commodification would be a good policy goal. A weakening of personal dependence through employment is an advancement towards equality. The question it addresses is thus rather different. While de-commodification asks to what extent the welfare state provides autonomy from the labour market, "commodification" asks to what extent the welfare state provides autonomy from family dependencies.

Other authors have made significant attempts to redefine welfare state regimes according to criteria that differ from those used in mainstream theory. Lewis (1992) provided the first alternative approach with her system based on variations in attachment to the male breadwinner ideology, known as the *breadwinner model*. The male breadwinner model is meant to reveal the



interaction of the public and private spheres of life in the organisation of welfare, which also implies the recognition of women's unpaid roles as welfare providers. Ostner (1997) later incorporated the breadwinner model into a broader concept of *individualisation* that includes a dimension of economic independence. A country's individualisation ranking is related to the strength or weakness of the male breadwinner model in that country, as well as to the degree to which individuals in that country are independent from family obligations. This latter is measured both by the existence of laws that enforce family obligations, and by the availability of full-time public services for children and the elderly. More recently, Sainsbury (1999) has added the *individual model* and the *separate gender regime* to the breadwinner model to demonstrate that countries belonging to the same main-stream regime type, such as the social-democrat regime, actually exhibit quite different types of gender regimes.

Finally, several experts have pointed out the importance of political participation as a dimension in the relationship between gender and welfare states (Hernes 1987; Siim 1988; Phillips 1996; Sapiro 1996; Fraser 1997). In this sense, political participation is understood as the influence over policy issues and the control of power positions. This implies an analytical focus that outlines women's roles in policy-making and their representation in the formal channels of politics on the one hand, and the impact of political structures on gender roles and gender relationships on the other. In an attempt to classify the different political strategies to deal with gender and the welfare state, Fraser (1997) suggested three "gender equity models". The "universal-breadwinner strategy" model aims at integrating women into labour market. The heart of this model is state provision of employment-enabling services. The "caregiver-parity model" instead attempts to place care work on par with waged work in terms of social rights, giving priority to state provision of caregiver allowances. Finally, the "universal-caregiver model", the strategy Fraser finds best suited to gender equity, is a combination of the previous two models that defends the rights of men and women to share caring and earning equally. It will be considered later to what extent policies to reconcile working and family life can move welfare states towards this "universal-caregiver model".

## **SOCIAL RIGHTS REVISED: CONVERGENCE BETWEEN FEMINIST AND MAINSTREAM PERSPECTIVES**

Mainstream scholars have largely accepted the feminist critique to the extent that the two broad bodies of literature have, to a certain degree, merged together quite consistently. What used to be two discrete spheres of investigation are now complementary and interactive. Gender is at present recognised as a

fundamental variable in shaping welfare states, and welfare states are likewise treated as a determinant not just of social class, but also of gender relations.

A good example of this shift can be found in the comparison of the introductory paragraphs of two influential volumes in the field, both edited by Diane Sainsbury. The introduction of *Gendering Welfare States*, published in 1994, reads:

“Feminist and mainstream theorizing and scholarship on welfare states have been informed by different research paradigms resulting in distinctive contributions. As yet there has been little effort to confront the two perspectives and to combine their insights in analysing welfare states and gender. Instead mainstream researchers have largely ignored feminist scholarship, and feminists have primarily engaged in a critique of mainstream analysis. The result has been an intellectual impasse which needs to be overcome” (Sainsbury 1994: 1).

Five years later, the author writes:

“The past decade has witnessed an exciting reorientation in welfare state research. The gender division of welfare, previously a neglected area of study in comparative scholarship, is currently a major focus of interest. Crucial to this reorientation have been feminist critiques of mainstream analyses of welfare states and the combining of feminist and comparative perspectives” (Sainsbury 1999: 1).

Welfare state scholars such as Paul Pierson (2000) now recognise that the literature on gender and the welfare state generated a fundamental break with traditional research by institutionalising a profound reconceptualisation of this field of research. Reviewing his much quoted but also criticised concept of de-commodification, Esping-Andersen (1999: 44) agrees in his more recent book that “the concept of de-commodification is inoperable for women unless welfare states, to begin with, help them become commodified”. The author has also recognised the importance of considering “defamilialisation”<sup>2</sup> along with “decommodification” since, despite decades of absence from welfare analysis, the household economy might be the most important “social foundation” of post-industrial economies (1999:6). Korpi (2000: 128) has also stated that:

“In recent years (...) in the social sciences as well as in history, feminist scholars have criticized mainstream analyses of inequality and welfare states for their neglect of gender aspects. They have forcefully argued that gender is one of the important factors that must be considered in analyses of inequality and welfare states”.

Thus, while in the past the author was concerned mainly with social class dynamics, he has since incorporated gender in his most recent comparative work on inequality and the welfare state. Furthermore, there has been a growing interest in researching the less explored areas of welfare states and in re-examining their role in welfare regime categories. Huber and Stephens (2001),

for instance, argue that public delivery of welfare services is the most distinctive feature of the social democratic welfare state, even more so than de-commodification or redistribution.

These shifts in research agendas and approaches raise two important questions. First, why the convergence? Second, to what extent has this coming together of mainstream and feminist research really reached all levels of analysis? Considering the first question, I will show in the following that several factors have contributed to this shift in the way gender is perceived and studied. As to the second, I will argue that important demands made within the feminist literature are still outstanding and need further questioning. Beyond the agreement on the centrality of access to employment and the need to reconcile work and family are important issues to consider such as the sharing and distribution of public and private responsibilities between the state, the market and the family, and the effect of this distribution on gender relations.

A number of issues regarding convergence in the literature emerge simultaneously. First, the vast quantity of feminist research that consistently raises the deficiencies of mainstream analyses of welfare states has certainly advanced the recognition and integration of gender as an analytical variable in methodological and theoretical approaches. Second, partly as a consequence of women's increased access to the labour market and of family change, there have been important changes at the behavioural level that contribute to the erosion of the male breadwinner model (Lewis 2001). Consequently, women's absence from the labour market and their dependence in the domestic sphere cannot be so readily assumed by society in general or by policymakers in particular. Third, the features of the "post-industrial" economy or the "post-modern" society have also helped to integrate the gender dimension into the mainstream. The breakdown of fixed divisions between men and women is both cause and consequence of much of the social changes in the post-industrial period. On the one hand, the growth of service sector employment, one of the features of the *new* economy, is strongly linked with the feminisation of the labour force. In Western Europe, female employment has been the cause of much of the growth in employment rates and it is expected that it will continue being so.<sup>3</sup> It is in fact a mutually-reinforcing process. The service sector economy both provides for and facilitates the entrance of women into employment, and increased female employment in turn usually creates an increased demand for the services provided in this sector. Somehow, paradoxically, there is a potential tension between women's lack of participation in the formal economy and the development of the welfare state (Crouch 1999). Activities that were previously understood as belonging to the sphere of unpaid domestic work are transformed into either privately or publicly paid sources of employment in the service sector. Therefore, the issue of women's access to employment and social rights

is now much more visible and measurable than it was just few decades ago. On the other hand, the “gender dimension” of welfare states plays an important part in the so-called welfare state crisis and needs to be addressed in order to solve some of the problems that contemporary welfare systems face today. In general, there is considerable consensus about the need for reform on key aspects of welfare provision. With the increasing prevalence of family breakdown, the growing range and variety of personal arrangements, and the disappearance of the “standard male industrial worker”, *familialistic* types of benefits are no longer adequate or appropriate for today’s patterns of family organisation. These benefits, which allocate important dimensions of an individual’s welfare to his/her family, are not just discriminatory for women, but are also largely inefficient and, in light of fiscal pressures, quite expensive as well. The reconciliation of work and family can then be seen as an effective remedy for welfare states’ current dilemmas. Many of the “new risks” of contemporary western societies are a consequence of patterns of individual and family trajectories that do not follow the prescribed picture of social protection systems. As recent studies and effective policy instruments have shown, employment is a good remedy for social exclusion and poverty. For example, allowing mothers to work can effectively prevent the risk of child poverty, which has increased considerably in many European countries over the past decade. Furthermore, the financial sustainability of income maintenance programmes can best be guaranteed by lowering the dependency ratio through, first, higher fertility rates and second, higher rates of female employment. We now know that in the European case women’s personal expectations for their professional trajectories are behind the often positive correlation between the issues of fertility and employment (Esping-Andersen 1999).

Increasingly, then, welfare states will have to be evaluated according to their capacity to bring individuals into employment; access to work should be one of the indicators through which policy change at national level will be studied. This means that there might be a decrease in the importance of income transfers with respect to services. Accordingly, welfare states will have to move quickly to find ways to “defamilialise” social rights, which implies, among other things, looking at the success of the public social service sector and other policies intended to help women reconcile the demands of work and family.

Whether or not these new policy proposals have been driven by concerns for gender equality remains an unanswered question. Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent policies for reconciling family and work promote gender equality. Can these policies create new forms of gender inequality? As Lewis (2001) points out, the shift from the “male breadwinner model” to the “adult worker model”, that is, the move from the traditional family form of husband-as-earner and wife-as-caregiver to that of dual-earner households should be seen as

improving women's position even though the actual outcome might be more or less positive depending on the conditions attached to the adult worker model. It is here that the division between paid work and care stands as a crucial issue.

Policies to reconcile work and family can serve more than one objective at a time by both satisfying the demands of women who want to be in paid work and by helping to solve some of the most urgent problems welfare states face today. However, an assumption of such convergence in interests might not be completely accurate. The motivation behind policy reform to facilitate women's access to employment might instead be driven by quite practical concerns, such as pro-natalist goals or unemployment objectives. I would argue that access to employment (operationalised as employment rates) is a weak indicator for measuring women's transitions from unpaid to paid work, and that it is inadequate without an evaluation of the conditions of such employment. Within the market sphere, the patterns of a gendered division of labour are as clear cut as the division between market and non-market work. This segregation usually manifests itself in the occupational structure, working time arrangements, earnings differentials, and the division between formal and informal employment. Furthermore, an evaluation of how these policies for reconciling work and family serve to increase equality would also require an inquiry into how they alter the divisions of labour and of time in place within the household. In consequence, I assume that families' arrangements to meet their work and caregiving burdens go well beyond simple activation of or participation in the explicit policy mechanisms meant to assist them, such as parental leave, childcare provision, tax allowances, and flexible working arrangements. Instead, the relationship between the sphere of work and the sphere of care is mediated by the complexity of the particular welfare mix in which these relations develop.

## **INSTITUTIONAL WAYS TO RECONCILE WORK AND FAMILY**

The different ways in which welfare gets allocated between the state, the market and the family is the result of a number of processes deeply rooted in the historical development of individual countries, with some shared tendencies within each welfare state regime. Within these historical trajectories, however, certain factors emerge that drive patterns of convergence and divergence in national policies and welfare state regimes. In terms of convergence, globalisation processes and the internationalisation of finance homogenise the conditions and the framework in which policymaking operates. Furthermore, policymaking at the supranational level also encourages a higher degree of standardisation between the nation-states. The European Union has produced a great deal of regulations and recommendations on issues related to reconciling work and family and, more generally, on gender equality.<sup>4</sup> In this way, some policy areas are now outside the domain of unilateral member-state action and

are subject to a number of compulsory rules established in EU legislation. Thus, supranational regulation does have an effect on specific policy development at the national level.

In terms of divergence, the responses to the external challenges and the implementation of supranational regulation are still widely based on the nation-state (Ferrera, Rhodes and Himerijck 2000). The specific characteristics and institutional arrangements of the welfare state and gender regimes have an impact on the development of policies to reconcile work and family life, since much of policy reform is institutionally path-dependent. Existing institutional arrangements heavily determine national trajectories. This implies the need for an examination of the institutional framework where the interactions between the political actors take place, and the opportunities and limitations this institutional framework imposes in the process. Institutional constraints also condition the strategic options of actors. The possibility of realising certain objectives depends, to a large extent, on the administrative feasibility of such changes.

In what follows, the responses of welfare state regimes to the need for reconciling family and work is considered within the context of the specific welfare mix in which these measures operate. The typologies are used only as a framework of reference. Further distinction between countries that belong to the same welfare regime will be needed to avoid overgeneralization.

Table 1: Four Gender Policy Regimes

Regime Attributes	<b>Male Breadwinner or General Family Support</b>	<b>Separate Gender Roles or Market Oriented</b>	<b>Individual Earner-Carer or Dual Earner</b>	<b>“Gathering breadcrumbs”</b>
Location	Continental Europe	Anglo-Saxon countries	Scandinavian countries	Mediterranean Europe
Conciliation Model	Combination	Choice	Continuity	Choice without support
Ideology	Division of labour Husband = earner Wife = carer	“Flexible” division of labour Husband = earner Wife = ½ earner/carer	Shared tasks Father = earner-carer Mother = earner-carer	“Blurred” division of labour Father = earner Mother = carer/ earner
Entitlement	Unequal among spouses	Differentiated by gender role	Equal	Unequal among spouses and among workers
Basis of Entitlement	Principle of maintenance	Family responsibilities	Citizenship or residence	Principle of maintenance/principle of need
Recipient of Benefits	Head of household Supplements dependants	Men as family providers Women as caregivers	Individual	Individual
Taxation	Joint Taxation Deduction dependants	Joint Taxation Deduction dependants	Separate taxation Equal tax relief	Individual Minor deductions
Employment policies	Priority to the main income provider. Flexibility for secondary earners	Segmented Full time/part time	Aimed at both sexes Full time/part time Public/private sector	Dualistic Core/periphery No flexible arrangements
Female Labour Force Participation	Middle/low High discontinuity Short part-time work	Middle/high High discontinuity Short/medium pt work	High High continuity Long pt work	Low High continuity Full-time
Sphere of Care	Partial State Involvement	Weak state involvement	Strong state Involvement	Weak state involvement
Caring Work	Paid component to caregivers in the home	Paid component to caregivers in the home	Paid component to caregivers in and outside the home	Unpaid
Political Tendency	Corporatist/conservative	Liberal	Social-democratic	Corporatist-left

Source: Author’s elaboration from Sainsbury (1999); Korpi (2000); Trifiletti (1999); León (2000) and Daly (2000).

The corporatist model encourages a partial reconciliation between work and family. The state assumes a certain degree of responsibility for the family and facilitates caring duties through subsidies and tax deductions. Women have the main responsibility for caring, and that is why leave provisions are relatively long while care provisions for children under the age of three are low. Female participation rates are middle/low and (short) part-time employment is one way women access the labour market since they often do so as secondary earners. Women tend to leave the labour market for periods of childbearing and child raising.

The liberal model represents the “choice” formula between paid work and family. Reproduction often implies discontinuity in female professional careers. Employment rates are high but women tend to leave the labour market for childbearing. This sequential model has negative implications for female professional careers in terms of income and social rights. By contrast, the low unemployment rates, together with employment flexibility allow for an easy movement between paid and unpaid employment. Ideologically, the sphere of the family is considered private and the state has no tradition in regulating the relations between the public and private spheres except for extreme cases. Thus, there is small provision of publicly funded childcare and limited provisions of leave arrangements. Generally speaking, the liberal regime allows market forces to dominate the shaping of gender relations. In fact, during the 1980s the UK was more strongly opposed than any other member state to the European directives on part-time employment, parental leaves and benefits for childcare, arguing that such regulations would interfere with people’s private lives.

The Social democrat regime comes closest to a real conciliation between family and employment. Given their strong commitment to a full-time employment agreement for men and women, the Scandinavian countries present high female employment rates and high continuity rates (Daly 2000). In general, women do not leave the labour market for childbearing. The reconciliation between work and family is considered a social and public issue. This is partly the reason why the Social-democrat regime has always placed a great emphasis on public services for childcare. Paid leave arrangements are also high in comparison with most of the other European countries. There are, nevertheless, gender segregation patterns in the labour market. Particularly, the gender divisions evolve around full time and part time employment and by public and private sector.

The Mediterranean model is probably the most difficult to categorise. The countries of southern Europe tend to cluster by their “absences”. The notion of “gathering breadcrumbs” addressed by Trifiletti (1999) refers to the fact that within one family unit, individuals gather minor sources of income from a range



of sources. These include various types of benefits and earnings from both the informal and formal economies. While none of these sources alone is adequate for providing a decent living, when taken together they can constitute a reasonable income. For that reason, the welfare state is not based on the principle of a strict sexual division of labour but rather on a blurred one whereby the main income provided by the male partner is supplemented by the female partner's earnings, with the female partner still maintaining her role as full-time carer. The income gathering takes place entirely behind closed doors. The family plays a crucial role although informally and "in shadow", since no real recognition is given through any explicit family programme. The state acknowledges and implicitly allows these informal arrangements but it does not take on the responsibility of guaranteeing a family wage. However, contrary to the liberal regime, the limited public intervention in family issues is not ideologically motivated, but rather an outcome of low political and social relevance and priority in a context of limited public resources. The result is low female employment rates and low birth rates. Flexible working arrangements, which in many countries have become crucial for women's access to employment, are scarcely developed in the countries of southern Europe. However, although female employment rates in these countries are much lower than the EU average, they have been growing at a much higher rate. Given the lack of measures to support female employment, activity rates are increasing thanks to informal family support and individual strategies. In the case of young women, the support received from their mothers seems to be of strategic importance (Tobío 1998; Moreno 2000).

Nevertheless and as argued earlier, there are still countries which are very difficult to classify within the regimes framework. France, Portugal and the Netherlands are three good examples of countries that cannot be easily grouped in light of their female labour force participation rates. Besides, in the case of policies for reconciling family and work, one particular country can go through different strategies at different political periods. Analyses of welfare regimes are useful in the sense that they help us to identify those institutional settings that are more (or less) prepared to deal with female participation in the labour market and its implications in terms of the balance between paid and unpaid work. Still, although to different degrees, there are some shared characteristics among all countries regarding female access to the labour market and the nature of their participation. For example, there are similar cross-national patterns of women's employment under flexible working arrangements, within the service sector, and in low-wage jobs. Women work part-time much more than men do, everywhere. Furthermore, the service sector appears to be an important source of employment for women in all national contexts. Equally, in most countries women make up the largest component of low paid workers. These common traits acquire particular relevance within the complexity of the post-industrial

economies. Focusing on the European context, close attention is being given to female employment. The employment targets set up in the Lisbon European Council in 2000 included the objective of increasing the number of women in employment as a prerequisite to raise the overall employment rate from an average of 54% in the year 2000 to more than 60% by 2010 (European Commission 2001: 13). In fact, women took some 60% of the new jobs created in the EU since 1995, reducing thus the gender employment gap. However, there are new trends of labour market segmentation in the knowledge-based economy with uncertain implications for work and family arrangements, and its impact from a gender equality perspective.

## **TARGETING FEMALE EMPLOYMENT GROWTH**

A large proportion of the new jobs created over the last years in the post-industrial economies is classified as high-skilled non-manual occupations in the service sector. Although women have taken up a large proportion of these new jobs, these sectors are gender biased, with men taking up two thirds of the new employment. In these high-skill jobs there seems to occur a gender gap in earnings even within similar levels of education and in the same occupational category. According to the European Commission report (2000: 42), the earning gap is particularly pronounced at the top end of the scale among the men and women with the highest level of earnings. Furthermore, fewer women than men worked in jobs with supervisory responsibilities, being thus underrepresented in jobs at higher levels of management. At the other end of the occupational scale, however, other problems arise. Low-paid and low-skill jobs in the service sector are particularly relevant for issues of reconciling work and family in the sense that this type of employment interferes in a direct way with unpaid female care work.

The expansion of low-end, low-productivity, low-paid jobs in the sheltered sector<sup>5</sup> has been presented as one plausible solution to the problems of unemployment, the financial sustainability of welfare states and to the *employability* of groups who have difficulty entering the labour market. The “*service sector trilemma*” whereby “the goals of employment growth, wage equality and budgetary constraint come increasingly into conflict” (Ferrera and Rhodes 2000: 259) has gained much attention over the last years. Given an increase in unemployment caused by the weakening demand for low-skilled manufacturing employment, welfare states are confronted with increasing inequality (if employment growth comes from the side of the private service sector) or budgetary restraint (if employment growth is the result of public sector investment). Ultimately, and given the limits of maintaining high public deficits in the long term, the *trilemma* seems to entail a trade-off between inequality and unemployment to the extent that wage flexibility and low protection of workers seem to be pre-conditions for the expansion of this type of

employment. The potential problems of stigmatisation that this sort of employment might produce can be avoided by enhancing mobility between different types of employment. In this way, a “bad job” does not become a job for life but a job for a limited period in one’s working history. The key issues then, are mobility and empowerment.

Any policy level discussion or decision regarding low-wage employment in the service sector must start with the acknowledgement that it concerns women in a specific manner. On the one hand, women are particularly affected by unemployment and they make up the largest group with employability problems, so for them, this sort of employment might be one way to “get started”. On the other hand, many of the tasks that become commodified through low wage service employment have traditionally been performed outside the market as unpaid female work. By being able to buy certain domestic services in the market, women can free themselves from domestic work. At the same time, employment in these sorts of services is fairly feminised, which means that new job opportunities for women might be created.

However, our concern here is to find out whether this type of employment, and eventually other forms of flexible jobs, can solve the problem of women’s access to paid work. Or, to put it differently, whether access to this type of paid work is the *long-desired* solution to women’s independence. Can it be presented as an answer to the dilemma of how to combine domestic and market employment? To respond to these questions, there are a number of issues to be taken into account. To begin with, there are reasons to be suspicious about the positive effects of “low-end” jobs in the service economy. Mobility has never been easy to accomplish, and decades of redistributive policies have been intended more to improve general life conditions than to achieve mobility across the different social and economic groups. Recent research has shown that certain groups of workers make up a disproportionate share of low-paid employment, and that contrary to positive mobility, they get caught in cycles of downward mobility from which escape is difficult. Several authors (Asplund and Persson 2000; Sloane and Theodossiou 2000) have identified a vicious circle of low-pay/no-pay status that above all affects women with low educational qualifications and skills. Spells from the labour market and long periods of unemployment increase the risk of being a low-paid worker, which in turn increases the risk of being unemployed. Thus, their weak attachments to the labour market make them more vulnerable to getting caught low-wage jobs. It is then important to remember that when referring to mobility, moves into unemployment and inactivity are much more frequent at the bottom end of the earnings distribution than at the top end. In addition to this, and given the nature of employment in the service sector, labour market institutions such as wage negotiation, anti-discrimination legislation and collective bargaining are limited

and have little impact on the situation of service sector workers. The weakness of these labour market institutions is seen as a factor in wage inequalities and the incidence of low pay (Lucifora 2000).<sup>6</sup>

From the policy intervention perspective, the status of many low-paid workers, mainly women and young workers, might not be regarded as critical since there is not a strong association between their low-wage earnings and being in poverty. As Nolan and Marx (2000) have shown, poverty rates for low-paid male workers are much higher than for low-paid female workers. The poverty status of households with a low-paid employee hinges more on the extent to which the household relies on the earnings of the low paid worker. However, most low paid workers, particularly low-paid married women, live in households with more than one earner. By contrast, the highest poverty rates generally occur among low-wage earning married men who are heads of households with dependent children (Nolan and Marx 2000: 110). In this sense, there is not much pressure to improve the conditions of those who have low-wage jobs but are also considered as secondary earners. There are, however, two clarifications to be made. First, women increasingly must depend on their own earnings for a living. This is especially true of lone mothers who have only their own single low income to support themselves and their families; these women have progressively become an at-risk group for living in poverty. Changes in the socio-demographic structures show that relying on the redistribution of income within the family might not be a very safe strategy for keeping women out of poverty. Second, even if wage inequalities and sharp labour market segregation do not lead to a “social crisis”, these kinds of jobs do not offer much either in terms of the “equity model” presented earlier, or in terms of responding to the claims for independence described by early feminist scholars.

From the issues raised so far, it seems that low-wage service employment and other forms of flexible arrangements with weak protection provide a viable solution for combining paid and unpaid work. These forms of employment, however, do little in terms of overturning traditional patterns of gendered division of labour. The traditional “male breadwinner model” remains on stage, though in a different guise. Different working time arrangements within paid work can be supplanting the distinction between participation and non-participation in paid employment.

Therefore, the above-discussed ways in which women have recently been able to access employment do not automatically lead to a comprehensive reorganisation of work, nor do they necessarily signify progress towards greater gender equity. Indeed, men and women do not participate in the labour market on an equal basis, and the responsibilities of paid labour and caring are not equally shared. Job growth in the service sector, as well as forms of flexible

employment such as part-time work might not only fail to address the issue of gender equality, but might in themselves constitute discriminatory practices (O'Reilly and Fagan 1998; O'Reilly, Cebrian and Lallement 2000). Furthermore, the challenge of reconciling work and family is further complicated by the different incentives and preferences of men and women regarding the work-family balance (Blossfeld and Hakim 1997; Hakim 2000).

In sum, while the creation of employment in the social and personal services might be a short-term solution for providing women access to the labour market, they might offer very little in terms of making the existing occupational structure more fluid. Allowing women to enter the labour market does not necessarily relieve them of the routine and time-intensive activities of care work. Importantly, beyond women's continued connection with caring is the association of care work and low-income jobs with low career expectations. Women might be able to move from unpaid to paid work or to combine both at the same time, but the hierarchical structures and value systems that determine the nature of and access to high-skilled jobs (either paid or unpaid), or conversely, the nature of and traps surrounding unskilled work (either paid or unpaid) could remain extensively gendered. The division between the private and public spheres goes well beyond the divide between unpaid and paid labour, and the situation will change very little if the debate on the organisation of work continues to neglect an elaboration of the definitions and categories associated with specific forms of work. As Maruani (2000) points out, the boundaries between activity and inactivity are largely social constructions. In terms of qualification, for instance, inequalities are often produced by the very definitions of occupational categories, which in fact are politically constructed. Sharing this idea, Phillips (1999: 69) argues that:

“(...) Even if we allow the legitimacy of differential rewards for differential work, the valuation currently attached to particular jobs is often highly questionable”.

Policies aimed at reconciling family and work need to address the issue of how care is placed within the labour market structure. If care work needs to become commodified work, then it needs to be properly valued, since as Lewis (2001) remarks, if care is not valued caregiving becomes degraded and exploitative.

The effects of the low-wage service sector and other forms of precarious employment will have to be tested further. But at some point, some assessment will have to be made regarding the weight given to the low-pay issue. A general increase in low-wage employment might be a way to facilitate access to the labour market for secondary earners, and thus help cut unemployment. A broader perspective has to be taken, however, if issues such as gender equity or broader conceptions of social justice are included as objectives of policy action.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS: REFLECTIONS ON GENDER EQUALITY**

In this paper I intended to stress a number of issues regarding the notion of gender equality in relation to employment, the family, and the policies meant to facilitate the combination of the two. First of all, the paper emphasised that actual work and family arrangements go well beyond the specific policy instruments designed to help families balance paid work with the demands of domestic and family responsibilities. In addition, there is the implicit idea that gender inequality is not exclusively framed according to the division between the paid and unpaid spheres. The complicated relationship between family and work and the burden of domestic responsibilities that women must sustain while engaged in the paid work do not completely explain gender inequality and gender segregation in the labour market. Nowadays, demographic changes such as delayed childbearing and lower marriage rates mean that the number of women who enter the labour force with no family responsibilities is increasing, especially among young women. It is significant to note that they too are affected by gender discrimination.<sup>7</sup> In other words, employment discrimination also exists in cases where there is no real work/family dilemma. Therefore, although reconciling work and family is a pre-condition for women's independence, the concept of gender equality cannot be restricted to this dimension. As Scott (1986) has argued, gender is a constitutive element of social relationships and is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. That is, gender has an effect in social and institutional relationships and is also implicated in the construction of power itself. Therefore, both dimensions of the term gender recognise that gender relations define structures of differentiation, inequalities, and hierarchies (Orloff 1996). While in some senses the integration of women into paid employment indubitably contributes to the attainment of gender equality, it deserves closer scrutiny because other spheres of gender inequality remain unaltered, and new ones associated with paid work can be generated as well.

The paper has also highlighted that the goal behind the reconciliation of work and family life might be very different from a fair notion of gender equality. Though provisions to reconcile work and family life might appear as equal opportunity policies, in practice they can be double-edged swords for women's equality. Some policies assume an equal distribution between men and women of paid and unpaid work, while others aim to preserve women's role as carers –either inside or outside the domestic sphere- by promoting certain types of “female” flexible working arrangements. These latter policies effectively maintain gender stratification in the labour market. Parental leave policies and policies accommodating career breaks are two of the main policies that allow the reconciliation of work and family life. However, depending on how the

measures are articulated, gender equality will or will not be an objective. Policies that start from the idea that women have primary responsibility for caring might enable women to engage on paid work but never on the same basis as men since men are not seen as carers. Provisions targeted at men with the idea of promoting a greater sharing of care responsibilities between men and women, however, probably offer more in terms of encouraging gender equality. Furthermore, the integration and persistence of women in paid employment can be achieved through a number of ways with very different repercussions in terms of gender equality.

Finally, the nature and heterogeneous forms of the category “family” also problematize discussions on the relationship between equality and the family, and suggest a multi-level approach to studying it. First, equality can be analysed by looking *inside* the family. As has been already pointed out, policies aimed to reconcile family and work do not affect each member of the same family in the same way. Second, the effect of these policies on equality might also vary depending on the type of family to which they are applied. The composition of the household (number of members, age, etc...) is very important in terms of family life. Furthermore, variables such as income level, occupation, and the educational attainment of its members also have a considerable impact on families. Correspondingly, for example, families and individuals at different income levels are affected by policies in quite different ways. In this sense, the needs and opportunities families have regarding the reconciliation of work and family life can vary quite widely. This diversity needs to be thoroughly considered to really understand the dynamics of the different strategies households adopt to combine domestic and caring responsibilities with paid employment.

To conclude, this essay has tried to frame the question of when policies to reconcile family and work should be considered as gender equality policies. One tentative answer might be that only those measures that aim to modify the gendered organisation of work between (and within) paid and unpaid labour can be considered as policy practices oriented towards gender equality. Policies will have to be assessed by their capacity to modify the distribution of paid and unpaid work, as well by their impact on persistent inequalities within the world of paid work such as pay inequality and the vertical and horizontal segregation of the occupational structure.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> European Commission (1997) *Modernising and Improving Social Protection in the European Union*; (1998) *Social Action Programme 1998-2000*; (1999) *Employment in Europe*.

<sup>2</sup> Policies that reduce individuals' dependence on the family and maximise individuals' command of economic resources independently of familial relations (Esping-Andersen 1999: 45).

<sup>3</sup> According to Rubery and Smith's predictions, prime-age women provide the largest potential source of labour supply in the EU. It is very likely that the growth of female employment will continue to be the main contributor to increasing employment rates (Rubery and Smith 1999 in Latta and O'Conghaile 2000:2).

<sup>4</sup> The Lisbon European Council of March 2000 recognised the necessity to facilitate the reconciliation of working life and family life by investing in child care provision; The Employment Guidelines 2000 also argued in favour of promoting policies to combine family and work such as the establishment of affordable, accessible and high-quality caring services for dependants and arrangements for parental leave; The Community Action programme on equal opportunities for men and women (1996-2000) also had as one of its objectives the reconciliation of work and family life for men and women, focusing on the quality of care services, flexible work and the sharing of domestic and caring responsibilities for men and women

<sup>5</sup> Economic sector not exposed to international competition: locally consumed services activities in wholesale and retail trade, restaurants and hotels and the heterogeneous category of community, social and personal services, including public education, health care, social services, and privately financed household and personal services (Ferrera and Rhodes 2000: 13).

<sup>6</sup> However, the effectiveness of institutional arrangements in dealing with gender segregation in the labour market cannot be taken for granted. As several authors have shown, the use of collective bargaining, for instance, cannot be always considered as an effective mechanism for the enforcement of gender equality legislation. As Bercusson and Dickens 1996 pointed out, collective bargaining is a gendered process in itself in the sense that the culture behind bargaining mechanisms is often still dominated by industrial relations' framework.

<sup>7</sup> In Spain, unemployment among young women is higher than in any other population group. By contrast fertility rate is very low and the average age for mothers' first child is 30 years old.



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