# Gender differences and equality issues in Europe: critical aspects of gender mainstreaming policies

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# RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Gender differences and equality issues in Europe: critical aspects of gender mainstreaming policies

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Gender mainstreaming is the major global strategy for the promotion of gender equality. Clear intergovernmental mandates for gender mainstreaming have been developed for all the major areas of work of the United Nations and the European Commission, including disarmament, poverty reduction, macro-economics, health, education and trade. The evaluation of equal opportunities mainly focuses on qualification measures for unemployed women and improvements in childcare facilities, and on consideration of gender mainstreaming in other policy areas as well as macro-economic effects on employment and unemployment of women. It is evident that the promotion of qualification measures and childcare facilities increases the activity rate of women, although there remain doubts about the quality and sustainability of many measures and the impact on families. In particular this article focuses on the relation between gender mainstreaming and equality issues to examine whether and how the debate on the topic is a real way to improve equality without missing gender differences and women's rights.

**Keywords:** gender; equal opportunity; gender mainstreaming; European social policies

### The importance of equality and difference in the EU agenda

The European Union has been focusing increasing attention on gender issues, and especially on considerations of the female condition. Recent developments in European countries are that more and more women are joining the labour force, birth rates are declining and social policies are mainly orienting their measures towards gender equality.

These problems, set within a European framework of public spending cuts, make it difficult to maintain and sustain the current type of welfare state. The paper focuses on equality/difference issues and gender mainstreaming to examine whether and how the debate on this topic is implemented in the European social policy systems. Although some significant improvements have certainly been made – especially in terms of women's emancipation, gender equity and maternity policies – it should, however, be noticed that some fundamental issues still remain unresolved and continue to pose problems.

Even if the progressive development of women's rights in Europe is testament to the role played by the EU in promoting equal rights and equal opportunities at the

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national and transnational level, most feminist literature in the field has argued that there are some inherent limitations in striving to achieve equality in a legal system that was developed predominantly to maximize the economic gains of its member states (Stratigaki 2000, Guerrina 2002).

In recent years the 'social justice' case for the promotion of gender equality has been strengthened by a heightened awareness regarding the negative consequences of gender-based inequalities on overall economic performance (Walby and Olsen 2002). The persistent gender pay gap and the continued concentration of women in low-status and low-paid occupations indicates that modern labour markets operate in such a way as to sustain women's relative disadvantaged position within the world of paid work. Furthermore, the gendered division of labour within the household raises questions about the possible impact women's increased participation in the formal labour market is having on the future supply of labour.

Consequently, the politics of difference perspective is aimed at identifying the 'androcentricity of organizations' and seeks to change it, thus facilitating women's full participation on equal terms. It is a longer-term strategy towards equal opportunities than either equal treatment, positive actions or positive discrimination and recognizes, and indeed celebrates, diversity.

Mainstreaming policies are those which respect and respond to differences, rather than seeking to assist women to fit into male institutions and cultures by becoming more like men (Cockburn 1991). The model of equal opportunities, which underlies mainstreaming policies, is based upon the notion of the politics of difference. While the significance of the concept of difference between groups rather than sameness among individuals is now widely accepted, its implications for policies seeking to ensure equal opportunity are less well understood.

In fact, there are three conceptualizations of equal opportunity within the EU policies (equal treatment, positive actions and positive discrimination, and main-streaming equality) that can be linked to three approaches: 'tinkering, tailoring and transforming' (Rees 1998, p. 42 and ff.):

- *tinkering* is essentiality about tidying up the legislation and procedures for equal treatment. This includes providing a sound legal base with adequate resources to ensure law enforcement. While limited in its effectiveness, the law nevertheless has some capacity to change practice and policy;
- *tailoring* (positive actions and positive discrimination) involves the use of supplementary and support measures and sanctions to encourage more effective equality of access. It allows for 'add-on', supplementary measures to take account of women's 'special' position: 'nips and tucks' to accommodate their different shape;
- *transforming* training provision builds upon the concept of politics of difference and seeks to feminize the mainstream or mainstream equality. It implies moving beyond add-on policies to support and encourage women's participation. It involves a paradigm shift from the thousand flowers of good practice we know to be blooming from various compendia and from specialist women's training projects to mainstreaming good practice. The transforming agenda is predicated upon the argument that opportunities to participate in education, training and employment should not be enhanced or restricted by membership of one group or another.

The questions raised at the beginning of the gender mainstreaming implementation process focused on the potential role of the EU in bridging the gap between formal and substantive equality, and its impact on women's choices about motherhood. The answer to each of these questions, and those raised by the introduction of the concept of mainstreaming within EU policy rhetoric and policy-making, is that EU policies continue to promote a concept of equality that is biased in favour of legal rights. This continued focus on formal rights has occurred at the expense of a more comprehensive approach to gender and the construction of gender roles.

The action-oriented position leads many scholars to emphasize 'substantive equality' rather than 'formal equality' (Hakim 2003), terms that are used to gloss over the fact that equal pay laws will not eliminate the pay gap and produce symmetrical pay distributions if sex differences in work histories, education and training, motivation to succeed and other factors persist in most labour markets. Differences between primary and secondary earners are ignored; any pay gap is treated as discriminatory even if fully explained; and they also demand that the minimum wage be set at a level to provide everyone with a living wage.

Feminist discourses on the principle of equality have discussed at length the advantages and disadvantages of promoting women's legal rights as workers separately from women's rights as mothers (Phillips 1987, Bock and James 1992, Evans 1995, Crompton 1998). Moreover, the study of the statutory position of women in Europe has led Hervey and Shaw (1998), Hoskyns (1985), Meehan and Collins (1996) and Helms and Guffey (1997), among many others, to envisage a distinction between formal and substantive equality, whereby the former relates to women's legal rights, while the latter refers to the relationship between women's legal rights and their socio-political and economic standing in the public and the private spheres. Each of these studies, although focusing on different functions of the gender–employment nexus, articulates similar arguments about the impact of the public–private dichotomy on the position of women in the official labour market. The analysis of the position of working mothers in the EU falls within this conceptual framework, as it marks a point of convergence between private roles and public rights (Guerrina 2002), thus challenging traditional conceptualizations of European politics in several ways. Perhaps the most fundamental question raised by this particular study revolves around the emancipatory value of an organization originally founded to promote the economic interests of its member states.

But what does 'equality' mean?

As Rubery (2002) points out, progress towards equality cannot be assessed unless it is clear what a more equal society would look like. In addition, understandings of its meaning inevitably influence the equality strategies and policies the industrial relations actors pursue.

Jewson and Mason (1986) distinguish between liberal and radical approaches to equality. The former holds that equality exists 'when all individuals are enabled freely and equally to compete for social rewards'. The role of the policy-maker is to devise measures to facilitate fair competition; for example, governments might increase childcare provision and public bodies might produce literature in minority languages. At the heart of this approach is the belief that fair procedures will result in fair outcomes. In contrast, the radical approach sees a need to intervene directly in order to achieve a fair distribution of rewards: the role of the policy-maker is to

devise interventions and make decisions that will redress inequalities of outcome. This could include positive discrimination in employment.

Both approaches have been criticized. The liberal approach is considered unable to deliver equality, while the more interventionist radical approach is often perceived negatively as reverse discrimination, special treatment or tokenism. In response to these criticisms, Cockburn (1991) suggests an alternative concept of 'transformational' equality strategy, one with both 'short' and 'long' agendas. The former treats the symptoms of discrimination and disadvantage, resonant with the liberal approach. The latter is a project of transformation, which acknowledges the need of disadvantaged groups for access to power, and has echoes of the radical approach.

The concept of gender mainstreaming adopted by the EU fits with the idea of transformational equality (Rees 1998, Kirton and Greene 2005) because it involves subjecting all policies to examination, to ensure that a gender-equality perspective is incorporated.

### The role of EU in promoting gender equality and equal opportunities

As a matter of fact, gender equality is a goal that has been accepted, at least in theory, by governments and international organizations: it is enshrined in international agreements and commitments. Anyway there are many ongoing discussions about what equality means (and does not mean) in practice and how to achieve it because even if it is clear that there are global patterns to inequality between women and men,[1] the concrete actions to combat them are not so clear and common.

The European community was one of the first major institutions to seek to ensure equal treatment for men and women on the grounds that, by treating individuals equally, discrimination will be removed. From its early days, the principle of gender equality was considered as a key factor in its policies (Duncan 1995, De Clementi 2003, Ellina 2003). This general notion includes the different identities of European citizens, the acknowledgement and the protection of minority groups, the valuing of differences and the creation of a social, cultural and legal framework supporting gender balance.

During the making of the European Union, issues of gender equity played – as they do today – a key role in fostering participation in the labour market in conditions of equality, and they have also started having an important and continued influence on the policy-making process of the new member states. Article 119 in the Treaty of Rome (1957) referred to the right of women to equal pay with men and this inclusion in the Treaty related to the prevention of market distortion rather than being an explicit social-policy commitment.

One of the main roles of the European Union is in promoting substantive equality for men and women in the European labour market. For this purpose it looks at the assumptions about gender roles and gender divisions of labour enshrined by EU directives on maternity rights and parental leave. This article presents a theoretical discussion of the role of EU policies in protecting women's rights and thus promoting a socio-economic model that allows men and women to reconcile work and family life. The main policies at the heart of this research are the 1992 Pregnant Worker Directive, the 1996 Parental Leave Directive, the 1992 Childcare Recommendations and the 2000 Council Resolution on Balanced Participation in Work and Family Life. The article thus assesses the gender biases of EU policies and

the ensuing implications for the future of gender relations and socioeconomic trends in Europe (Guerrina 2002). Since its conception in 1957, the European Union (EU) has played an important role in the development of European politics and policy-making, and is now a key actor in national and international politics.

Pascall and Lewis (2004) address some implications for gender equality and gender policy at European and national levels of transformations in family, economy and polity, which challenge gender regimes across Europe. Women's labour market participation in the west and the collapse of communism in the east have undermined the systems and assumptions of western male breadwinner and dual worker models of central and eastern Europe. Political reworking of the work/welfare relationship into active welfare has individualized responsibility.

Individualization is a key trend in the west – and in some respects the east – and challenges the structures that have supported care in the state and the family.

The links that joined men to women, cash to care, incomes to carers have all been fractured. Care work and unpaid care workers are both casualties of these developments. Social, political and economic changes have not been matched by the development of new gender models at the national level. And while EU gender policy has been admired as the most innovative aspect of its social policy, gender equality is far from achieved: women's incomes across Europe are well below men's; policies for supporting unpaid care work have developed modestly compared with labour-market activation policies. Enlargement brings new challenges as it draws together gender regimes with contrasting histories and trajectories.

It is important to map social policies for gender equality across the key elements of gender regimes – paid work, care work, income, time and voice – and discuss the nature of a model of gender equality that would bring gender equality across these. It involves analysis of ideas about a dual earner–dual carer model, in the combination scenario and 'universal caregiver' models, at household and civil society levels. These offer a starting point for a model in which paid and unpaid work are equally valued and equally shared between men and women, but we argue that a citizenship model, in which paid and unpaid work obligations are underpinned by social rights, is more likely to achieve gender equality.

These specific issues – and others – need to be addressed in efforts to promote gender equality as a goal. Achieving greater equality between women and men requires changes at many levels, including changes in attitudes and relationships, changes in institutions and legal frameworks, changes in economic institutions, and changes in political decision-making structures through this kind of gender mainstreaming that includes as much as possible the empowerment of the individuals involved.

### The citizenship of gender in EU political agenda

Today's discussion of the future of social inclusion and citizenship stresses two major issues: the crisis of the European social model (the national level of social citizenship) and the integration problems in the development of the European Union (the transnational level of social citizenship) (Hoskyns 1996, Roche and Van Berkel 1997, Taylor-Gooby 2004).

Social citizenship is a historically changing construct, subject to debates and competition between actors with differing interests, using different rationales to

justify their claims. Like Lister (1997, p. 5), it is important to focus the analysis on *how* citizenship is created. Bleijenbergh *et al.* (2004) argue that the concept of social citizenship, which has mainly been used for analysing social policy developments at the national level, is also relevant to debates and developments at EU level. As Marshall (1963) demonstrated in his classic essay *Citizenship and social class*, citizenship represents membership in a community. Following the introduction of civil and political rights, the social element of citizenship encompasses the right to social welfare, which is also formulated as the right to live the life of a civilized being (Marshall 1963, p. 74).

Marshall argues that the development of social rights of citizenship in the British welfare state was an effect of the capitalist market system, but also a prerequisite for its effective functioning. The social rights of citizenship modify the structural inequalities caused by the market, but are also a necessary condition for its operation (by guaranteeing equal access to it). Inequality in the (labour) market can only be justified by the fairness of equal citizenship (Zetlin and Whitehouse 2003, p. 786).

Marshall's analysis of the process of citizenship formation in the British welfare state and his focus on social class struggle are not universally applicable: comparative research shows the development of citizenship in other welfare states, such as Germany and France, to have followed a different course (Turner 1992). Moreover, it is now recognized that gender differences are a structural source of social inequality comparable to social class (Pateman 1989, Orloff 1993).

The sequence of introduction of civil, political and social rights varies according to time, place, class and sex; the issues at stake are not only the redistribution of income and social security rights, but also the redistribution of social care services and unpaid care-giving activities (Lewis 1992, Bussemaker and Van Kersbergen 1995, Anttonen and Sipilä 1997).

The notion of citizenship, especially in its political connotation, is closely linked to gender and in particular to participation in the public domain; philosophers were responsible for a fundamental representation of the roles of man and women. They were the key advocates of change and movement toward the future. Yet nowhere in this picture of reform did they see women. Rousseau is one of the philosophers who did not believe that women were of great potential, or that they needed higher education. To him, men were above women. He believed that the man did not need the woman, and still the woman needed the man. He thought that 'the educations of men and women must be different because they are different'. Wollstonecraft, a feminist, expressed a much different opinion. She understood that from birth a woman was educated in how she should act. She thought that men paid attention to the wrong qualities in women. She wanted women to be able to show more than their femininity. To her, women were resilient and capable of caring for themselves: 'women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government' (Wollstonecraft 1992, p. 6). Women began to consider that the way they had been being treated might not have been fair. Women of the eighteenth century did not wish to have greater power then men. They only wished for equal rights. Today women want more.

The focus on gender inequality has thus resulted in a redefinition of social citizenship to incorporate the right to time for caring (through paid leave or equal treatment in part-time work) and the right to be cared for (through social care services). As a component of inclusive social citizenship, part-time work requires

adequate social protection and a living wage (Knijn and Kremer 1998, Rubery *et al.* 1999).

Thus, women have to create a new meaning for citizenship, which had its foundations in the private domain. To do this instead of applying the all-or-nothing words 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' to gender differences, it seems sensible to stress the importance of partial citizenship (Bulmer and Rees 1996, Arnot *et al.* 2000, Verloo 2006).

In the attempt to overcome this model (men/public and women/private domain), there developed a so-called 'differentiated universalism' model (Lister 1997, 1998) in the field of gender studies. This approach commits a universalistic orientation of policies to the valuing of difference within democratic processes.[2] This model, however, highlighted the fact that, when it comes to practice, it is very complex to combine abstract and universal rights with those supported by a politics of difference (Young 1989); in other words, 'to root citizenship rights in a notion of needs, which are seen as dynamic and differentiated, as against the universal and abstract vision of rights' (Taylor 1989, p. 27). On the whole, differentiated universalism consists in the articulation of women's claims with regards to citizenship; women have always been faced with, on the one hand, universalistic claims – based upon the principle of equality between men and women – and, on the other hand, with particularistic claims – grounded in gender difference.

These claims represent the gender-neutral model of citizenship and the gender-differentiated model of citizenship respectively.

For example, Offen (1988) claimed that the traditional dichotomy between equality and difference derives from the thinking developed by a strand of 'relational' feminism, which emphasizes women's difference and their contribution in the framework of non-hierarchical relationships, underpinned by the values of care and solidarity. On the other hand, Offen also identified 'individualist' feminism, which focuses on women, their rights and their claims to independence and autonomy. In both cases, it is a male standard against which women's citizenship is measured, and where difference is conceived in binary rather than pluralistic terms.

To say that equality requires that women be treated alike when they are alike, and differently when they are different will often leave women vulnerable. For the traditionalist will respond that it is legitimate to discriminate against married women in the workplace because employers should be entitled to award plum jobs to workers who are not encumbered with family responsibilities that prevent them from devoting their full attention to their work. This is treating women differently because they are different. Is it consonant with the principle of gender equality for women? Clearly not. What these initial examples show is that treating women the same can leave women vulnerable (as in the case of alimony and custody reform) but treating women differently can leave them vulnerable as well. The language of sameness and difference is not only divisive; it is also confusing and analytically flawed.

Williams (2000) translates the 'sameness/difference' policy debates into a new language and a new analytical framework:

> treating men and women the same is a strategy that works well where the goal is to eliminate the disabilities traditionally experienced by women, but it can backfire when applied to women's traditional privileges, for treating caregiving women the same as men who do not have caregiving responsibilities only exacerbates such women's gender disadvantage. To correctly apply the principle of treating men and women the same

requires that formal equality be combined with an analysis of gender and power. Once this is accomplished, an analysis of masculine norms takes center stage. Where such norms exist, treating men and women the same will backfire unless they are first dismantled. Otherwise women will be further disadvantaged when they are treated the same as men in the face of norms that favor men because they are designed around men's bodies or life. (Williams 2000, p. 207)

Pateman summed up this situation as the 'Wollstonecraft dilemma': on the one hand, there are women who struggled to achieve full citizenship, according to the principles of liberal feminism; on the other hand, 'women have also insisted... as did Mary Wollstonecraft, that *as women* they have specific capacities, talents, needs and concerns, so that the expression of their citizenship will be differentiated from that of men' (1989, p. 196 and ff.).

Wollstonecraft's book, *The vindication of the rights of women*, was written in 1792 and it is an example of an early woman writer who challenges the established order and who uses literature as her means of speaking out to the world. It is an insightful look into the life of women in the early part of the eighteenth century. It was a philosophical examination of the condition of women, in relationship to some very basic rights, and is also a very enlightening look at how short a distance we really have come, as a society, in relationship to perceptions of women. The author began her book with words which clearly illustrate her concerns: 'after considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess that either Nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial' (1792, p. xi).

This dilemma seems to find a solution in the overall re-articulation of the divide between public and private spheres, where the relational understanding of concepts of equality and difference plays a key role.

In this regard, Pateman created a 'dualistic or gender-differentiated model of citizenship' (1989, p. 14), which, in modern democracies, seems to be based upon the differentiation between 'man-the-soldier' and 'woman-the-mother'. Basically, in order to attain citizenship rights, women must be like men; this also implies that they cannot become citizens *as* women in their own right.

This has problematized the relationship between individuals and citizenship, which had all too often been based upon men's freedom from care tasks and responsibilities (Pateman 1988). This shift of household/domestic responsibility towards men would produce a new division of labour in a gendered perspective; more precisely, it would lead to a redefinition of the meaning and value of 'public' (paid work) and 'private' (unpaid care work).[3] With respect to another issue, social care, Daly and Lewis (2000) argue that different styles of social policy have incorporated the key element of social care differently; they identify certain tendencies concerning care in specific welfare states. In conclusion, new proposals for women that are partly different from those that have gained favour so far are needed to push forward the construction of European citizenship and democracy from the gender perspective. This requires a search for different political models (Rossilli 2000, Sjöberg 2004, Lewis 1999).

Nowadays, European gender policy reflects the contradictions women must face in their struggle for equality, which are common to most public gender policies. All

provisions devised to progress in gender equality could have negative retroactive effects on women, due to the patriarchal context in which they are applied, showing how European gender policy could be still trapped in the 'Wollstonecraft dilemma'. A more holistic approach to European gender policy, able to tackle all the areas of which patriarchy is composed, and an improved monitoring of European gender policy implementation in the member states could both generate a more effective gender policy in the European and make further progress in solving the dilemma (Lombardo 2003, United Nation 2005).

Bleijenbergh *et al.* (2004) consider whether the development of European rights for workers implies a European social citizenship. They analyse the debate during the preparation and adoption of the EU Directive on part-time work in 1997, which guarantees part-time workers (who are primarily women) the same pay and working conditions as full-time workers. Was the concept of social citizenship discussed during its preparation and adoption? What kind of gender equality was involved: are women granted equal access to the European market or equal outcomes? They conclude that the Directive involves *industrial* rather than *social* citizenship, but ideals of social citizenship were nevertheless at stake during its preparation. As a matter of fact social policy in the EU context is essentially labour market policy and legislation to eliminate sex discrimination in pay and access to employment (Rubery *et al.* 2003). There is no such thing as gender policy in the EU context, although some contributors use the term.

## Gender mainstreaming as the best option?

Gender mainstreaming[4] was established as a major global strategy for the promotion of gender equality[5] in the Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Gender mainstreaming was not a new strategy in 1995. It was reaffirmed in the Beijing Platform for Action and built on years of previous experience in trying to bring gender perspectives to the centre of attention in policies and programmes. Although the notion of mainstreaming gender issues across the policy process had antecedents in the previous two decades, the official recognition and endorsement of mainstreaming as a formal goal of all UN member states has provided a global mandate for change, and 'a template against which to judge both national and international policies' (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002, pp. 339–340). In addition to specific actions for women – positive actions – gender mainstreaming emerged as a necessary strategy for fighting gender inequality in the long term through many documents and many directives.

The focus on gender mainstreaming was strongly reiterated throughout the Beijing Platform for Action, which emphasized the importance of considering the impacts on women and men, and on equality objectives, of actions taken in every sector. The responsibility of all government agencies for supporting equality objectives through their policies and programmes was highlighted. The Beijing Platform for Action also identified the important roles of international organizations, NGOs and civil society, the private sector and other actors (United Nations 2002).

After this important starting point, some others followed. The General Assembly Twenty-third Special Session to follow up implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (June 2000) enhanced the mainstreaming mandate within the United

Nations. The UN assessment prepared for the Beijing + 5 Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2000 concluded that, although some progress had been made in achieving gender equality, there were still significant shortfalls from full gender equality.[6]

Gender mainstreaming means that, in addition to specific policies addressing gender discrimination – which are still necessary to deal with actual gender discrimination – there is

> a need to look for a gender perspective in all public policies. And here, one should take into account the strategy of gender mainstreaming. If the main strategy of gender equality policies is gender mainstreaming, one would probably have to seek gender perspective as the searched effect in other public policies (that is, whether public policies – not the gender-equality policy – are formulated, executed and evaluated with gender perspective), in addition to evaluating the gender policy itself. (Bustelo 2003, pp. 384, 399).

The latest European guideline on equal opportunities policies concerns *mainstreaming*, as a way of supporting women's involvement in decision-making: this strategy consists of the horizontal implementation of equal opportunities in the widest possible range of sectors, while ensuring that issues concerning equal opportunities are considered at all phases of the policy-making process in each of these sectors[7] and is strictly related to the idea of gender mainstreaming as a transformative agenda. This approach promises a revolutionary change in the international and domestic policy process, in which gender issues become a core consideration not simply for specific departments or ministries dealing with women, but rather for all actors across a range of issue-areas and at all stages in the policy process from conception and legislation to implementation and evaluation. Equally clear, however, are 'the extraordinary changes required in the mentalities and organizations of both domestic and international actors in order for the principle of gender mainstreaming to be implemented fully' (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002, pp. 339–340). Thus defined, gender mainstreaming is a potentially revolutionary concept, which promises to bring a gender dimension[8] into all international governance.

Yet gender mainstreaming is also an extraordinarily demanding concept, which requires the adoption of a gender perspective by all the central actors in the policy process – some of whom may have little experience or interest in gender issues. This raises two central questions – why, and how, did the international community adopt a policy of gender mainstreaming at Beijing and since, and how has it been implemented in practice (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002, pp. 341–342)?

On the whole, European equal opportunity policies have been part and parcel of European Community modernizing action; 'on the one hand, they have contributed to creating new employment opportunities for women, especially in Southern countries, which were low in female labour-force participation, on the other hand, they have contributed to increasing sex/gender inequalities in terms of occupational segregation, wage differential, and social benefits' (Rossilli 2000, p. 10).

The gender mainstreaming process and strategy and the gender equality principle seem to become the core of every policy related to reconciliation policies, family policies and even employment ones. Given so strong a cultural and symbolic orientation it seems always more and more difficult to make progress about the relational aspects of individuals' lives (Crespi 2007).

Gender mainstreaming, however, has been largely used as an alibi for neutralizing positive action. The successful implementation of positive action in political decision-making challenged the gender distribution of political power over policy institutions and technical, human and financial resources. This led to policy softening and institutional weakening due to counteraction by the European political and administrative hierarchies (Stratigaki 2000, 2005).

In this sense gender policies, which emphasize the importance of dialogue, practice and negotiation in the relationship among men and women, work and family and individuals and institutions, fail to catch the specific relationality of this process. The lack of attention towards family welfare results in a tendency to consider family policies as provisions to be addressed always and exclusively to individuals and not to the relationships between them.

The risk of underestimating the importance of the family relationship is high and is increasing. This inattentiveness is all the more significant in work–family measures: is it possible to envisage work–family reconciliation policies targeting individuals (women, men and children) and, at the same time, to safeguard relationships?

Within this framework, the introduction of new tools and approaches addressing the changes in family life and its organization, but also in workplaces, can enhance the understanding of this phenomenon and the design of social policies, both in terms of equal opportunities and for the development of gender mainstreaming, respecting the multidimensional and relational life of individuals.

The new challenge seems to be the need to reconcile gender, family and work not only through policies but in their basic meaning for individual life; people experiences different spheres of life as an intertwined process, not artificially separable (Crespi 2008a).

### Conclusions

The trade-off between gender equality and gender differences empowerment is engendering a sort of competition in individual life paths between women's aspirations and the creation of a family, for instance.

Using a gender-friendly theoretical model, Guerrina (2002) suggests that promoting a socio-legal model of employment and care that is friendly to working mothers is not necessarily outside the remit of EU policies. What may be missing from European policies is the political will rather than the legal scope necessary to challenge gender hierarchies beyond the needs of the market and a policy-specific literature seeking to assess the successes and failures of EU policies in protecting and promoting the rights of women in Europe.

European law is based upon gendered assumptions about mothering and women's role in the reproductive process. This limited vision of the social and economic importance of maternity and motherhood in European society ultimately prevents European legislation from fully integrating the concept of substantive equality within its overall short and long-term aims (Guerrina 2002, Bould and Schmaus 2008, Crespi 2008b). This attitude not only fails to ensure the development of substantive equality, it also ignores the impact of European legislation on employment practices and demographic trends.

The problem has become feminized: though it is now evident that work–family reconciliation issues concern both men and women, in practice, these questions are considered mostly in terms of women's responsibilities; alternatively, they only address women rather than gender difference (Kimmel 2000, Lewis 2003).

There is a need for recognition that inequality between women and men is a relational issue and that inequalities are not going to be resolved through a focus only on women.

Mapping gender equality policies has also raised the question of interventions at different levels, from the individual, through the household, civil society and state (Pascall and Lewis 2004). Policies enabling individual women to achieve equality with individual men – policies against sex discrimination, for parental leave, for equal opportunities – have brought women into the labour market and supported their ability to care for children. For women with higher education they have brought well-paid work and the capacity to pay for care. But they have created diversity in labour markets and in households, with gender equality accessible only to advantaged women. They have also brought gender equality to women on men's terms, enabling women to balance work and family, but offering no challenge to men to do the same.

'Gender' is often used as shorthand for 'women'. Most development practitioners direct the bulk of their 'gender mainstreaming' efforts toward activities that aim to empower women economically and politically, protect their rights, and increase their representation in all manner of decision-making bodies. But gender is not just about women. Gender refers to socially constructed roles of both women *and men* as well as the relationships between them in a given society at a specific time and place. Yet where are men in the discourse on gender, family and work?

A feminized gender construction still prevails. Only a few actions are developed in consideration of a work–family balance; most policy interventions still reflect the construction of these questions as *women's issues*.

Gender difference is therefore overcome by a gender-neutral approach, where the neutralization of differences between men and women (differentiated universalism) – though inspired by the positive principle of doing away with inequalities – might eventually prove to be a very doubtful advantage: when gender relations are considered solely in terms of equality/inequality, there is a danger of losing sight of or removing attention from the original, positive difference underlying gender relations. This results in a not-taking-sides attitude, where the actual value of gender difference is removed from political and cultural discourse. To solve or prevent inequalities, you nullify differences.

More attention needed to be brought to the relations between women and men, particularly with regard to the division of labour, access to and control over resources, and potential for decision-making. There was increased understanding of the importance of seeking out male allies and in working with men to jointly redefine gender roles and relations. Thus there was a need to move away from 'women' as a target group, to gender equality as a development goal.

Consequently, scholars and policy-makers stress that equal opportunities schemes should not be addressed exclusively or almost exclusively to women since, in spite of their undeniable usefulness, they might reinforce the traditional separation of life spheres between genders and consequently strengthen gender stereotypes. These measures should address men too and meet needs that several studies show to be growing, at least among younger male generations (Donati 2005b).

In fact, not only do they demand greater male commitment to the family, which would be wholly justifiable; they also implicitly advocate the full exchangeability of gender roles, which, on the contrary, appears inappropriate: in fact, male opposition is not only indicative of men's cultural backwardness; it also reveals a different way of perceiving and experiencing the family.

Realistically, the question is how to promote a cultural change – without necessarily imposing it by law – and get men increasingly involved in childcare and 'household' tasks: in fact, the model whereby men are the breadwinners and women look after the family and the home still seems to be the unspoken rule. It clearly appears that if the subjects themselves are not able to develop a shared life plan, work–family reconciliation cannot possibly be achieved since, to a certain extent, this also calls for a culture change. In all countries, irrespective of their degree of gender equality, it appears difficult and sometimes even unthinkable to implement family-friendly policies – and especially legislation on parental leave – unless a real culture change is brought about. A major cultural problem still underlies hierarchical relationships between men and women and, to some extent, work relationships too. The culture change towards men's involvement in household tasks is rather slow, though it is showing some positive signals.

The real objective of European policies is not to achieve parity and equality in a strictly statistical sense, but to promote mutual change through the permanent development of social and personal relationships. Gender equality means an equal visibility, empowerment and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life; but, gender equality is the opposite of gender inequality, not of gender difference.

Hence, the principle of equal opportunities concerns not only women, but men and women alike as subjects who should contribute to the detection of their respective specificities and ensuing responsibilities in a positive way. The ultimate goal, however, remains a profound institutional, social and labour change, where parity could easily be accomplished in a new cultural context.

At a European level, family policies seem to be oriented towards childcare policies or lone-parent policies, which are, probably not coincidentally, the fields where there are greater calls for policies and interventions to tackle new poverty. Moreover, as a result of the reconciliation between work and family, family policies are currently being replaced by gender equality policies (Bould 2006).

Such a framework – equal opportunities on the one hand and female emancipation on the other, in a competitive and little-regulated market – seems to lead to a potential contraposition, or trade-off, between equal opportunity and family (or family-friendly) policies. In this regard, an interesting paradox should be noticed: although in the countries considered in this work the family is seen as the key element of family-friendly measures, in actual fact it appears that the two pillars of the current European strategy to promote work–family balance (equal opportunities and full female employment) might actually destroy the family, which is exactly what they intend to protect.

Instead of focusing on the family and on the welfare of the individual within family relationships, in order to compete in both European and global markets, greater emphasis is placed on equal opportunities and the possibility of self-determination as individuals in the labour market. This trade-off is not a desirable integration of the two dimensions; on the contrary, it produces a sort of

schizophrenia, which becomes apparent in the difficult management of everyday life or in dissatisfaction with one's way of life.

Furthermore, this choice, embedded in a culture of individualization, considers family welfare as irrelevant and secondary to the well-being of women, children and lone mothers: it thus appears to favour individual well-being to the detriment of a collective subject like the family and its potential for the whole of society (Donati 2003a).

According to Prandini (2006), following a multidimensional and multi-layered process of growing social and political convergence, Europe is developing an active welfare state characterized by mother-friendly policies. This selective blend of liberal and social democratic principles has produced a social-liberal (Lib/lab) welfare model (Donati 2005a), which adopts an ambiguous and contradictory approach towards the family. This new 'system' has some ironical consequences; it produces individualization, the erosion of social networks and the contracting, the marketing and the de-socialization of citizenship, and other things which are the very occurrences that it is supposed to 'make right'. Family is shoved to the background and concealed, exactly when its presence is needed the most. This results in a highly critical social situation (Donati 2003a, Pfau-Effinger 2004, Prandini 2006) which is characterized, on the one hand, by openness and new individual freedoms and, on the other, by increasingly pervasive control. In order to break this downward spiral, it is necessary to review the very foundations of family welfare and rethink it in a pluralistic and societal perspective.

It is important to emphasize that equal opportunities policies have been interpreted as facilitating an equal chance of securing employment in addition to determining one's equal chances in securing social welfare benefits (Drew *et al.* 1998, p. 158).

Equal opportunities in the workplace, citizenship rights and social welfare policies are all intertwined. It is therefore vital to examine the concept of equal opportunities understood as equality in conditions conducive to access to and participation in the labour force from a comparative perspective.

Looking in a more critical way at the concept of gender mainstreaming we ask how (and if) it is possible to evaluate the differences in an equal opportunity framework. The basic idea of gender mainstreaming is to give equal (formal) access to rights and to resources and to time management; but in practice the formal equality favouring differences runs the risk of neutralizing it.

The gender differences evaluation perspective is pushed out by a gender-neutral one, by which the removal of man/woman differences is a double-edged weapon: gender relationships are constructed on a unique difference that is not necessarily unfairness (Lewis 2003, Hantrais and Ackers 2005). It is important to consider the impossibility of gender role changes as not immutable, but it is probably necessary to think of another perspective to look at transformations within the family and work spheres. A comprehensive reconsideration of gender mainstreaming policies is necessary, as their effects and (side-effects) could be unhelpful for gender policies too.

## Notes

1. For example, women tend to suffer violence at the hands of their intimate partners more often than men; women's political participation and their representation in decision-making structures lag behind men's; women and men have different economic opportunities; women are over-represented among the poor; and women and girls make up the majority of people trafficked and involved in the sex trade (United Nations 2002).
2. For an expounding of the notion of citizenship with a gendered perspective, please see Lister (1997), Walby (1997), Arnot *et al.* (2000), Bleijenbergh *et al.* (2004).
3. See the contribution of Strandh and Nillson in Chapter 5.
4. Gender mainstreaming is a globally accepted strategy for promoting gender equality. Mainstreaming is not an end in itself but a strategy, an approach, a means to achieve the goal of gender equality. Mainstreaming involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities – policy development, research, advocacy/dialogue, legislation, resource allocation and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects. (Osagi UN), http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/gendermainstreaming.htm.
5. Equality between women and men (gender equality) refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women's issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development. (Osagi UN), http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/gendermainstreaming.htm.
6. Women and girls still represent 2/3 of the world's illiterates; fewer girls than boys finish primary school; women represent less than 15% of national elected officials; rural women are responsible for half of the world's food production and yet, globally, women own less than 1% of land. In some cases the so-called 'gender gaps' are to the detriment of boys. This is particularly the case in some regions where the educational performance and participation of boys is worse than that of girls (Ruprecht 2003).
7. For example in both the USA and Europe there has been pressure to introduce legislation to provide equal treatment for women at work, the implementation of which often depends on worker and other organizations (Acker 1989, Evans and Nelson 1989, Rees 1998). The European Union has passed a plethora of legally binding Directives as well as advisory Recommendations which require the equal treatment of women and men in employment and in employment-related activities. These Directives were passed not merely as a result of the interest of the European Commission, but as a result of political pressure from women activists (Rees 1998, Walby 2001).
8. Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a women or a man in a given context. In most societies there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context. Other important criteria for socio-cultural analysis include class, race, poverty level, ethnic group and age: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/gendermainstreaming.htm.

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