

Gender, family and work and the European cultural and social model: some critical aspects

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Abstract

The Lisbon Council invited the Commission and Member States to promote all aspects concerning equal opportunities in the field of employment policies, including the reduction of occupational segregation and the possibility to balance work and family life and to solve some of the increasing problems affecting several countries, such as lower and later fertility and the ensuing ageing of the population. Further, The basic idea of the ESM is that economic and social progress must go hand in hand; economic growth, in other words, is to be combined with social cohesion. 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 cause problems. Such 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.

Keywords: family, gender equality, reconciliation policies, European policy

Introduction

In March 2000, the Council of Europe held in Lisbon set out some daring and ambitious goals, whereby the European Union set out to become, within ten years, the most dynamic, competitive, and sustainable knowledge-based economy of the world, in a framework of full employment¹ and stronger social and economic cohesion (the so-called Lisbon strategy). The Council also identified *new* objectives for women in employment, basically *aimed* at increasing female employment rates.

Until then, European governments had aimed at reducing unemployment rates and thus decrease the number of unemployed people, not of inactive people, who are on the margins of the labour market.

In particular, the Lisbon Council invited the Commission and Member States to promote all aspects concerning equal opportunities in the field of employment policies, including the reduction of occupational segregation and the possibility to balance work and family life and to solve some of the increasing problems

affecting several countries, such as lower and later fertility and the ensuing ageing of the population.

Previous researches and studies (Plantenga and Remery, 2005, Strohmeier, 2002) have stressed the importance of structural and economic aspects in looking at the relationship among family, gender and work. It is time for a specific look at cultural and symbolic attitudes to better understand the impact of the European mainstreaming on the individuals and family life. In relation to equal opportunities, mainstreaming is said to involve not only the promotion of measures to assist women but the application of a gender perspective and analysis to all policies, programmes and actions of the Commission (European Commission, 1997b).

Gender equality is related to work and family issues because traditional expectations that women will be responsible for their children can be a significant barrier to women's employment opportunities. Therefore, gender equality cannot be achieved without societal recognition of the need to provide resources and support to help employees manage both work and family responsibilities. Also, in gender egalitarian societies women are more likely to be included in decision-making roles where they can influence policies to reflect the importance of work-family issues.

The common goal of reconciliation measures is therefore not only to support work-family balance, which is instrumental to achieving the objectives of the March 2000 Lisbon agreements but also to solve some problems that are increasingly concerning various countries, such as lower birth rates or the postponement of childbearing and the ensuing ageing of the population. The Europeanization of significant aspects of economic policy and the pervasive differences across EU welfare states in social outcome indicators and capacity for redistribution contribute to the considerable constraints on the open method of coordination in social inclusion. Fulfilling its potential is dependent on national policy legacies, political context and the involvement of a wide range of national actors in National Action Plan formulation and monitoring. This is set within a culture of equal opportunities (such as gender mainstreaming), which receive considerable attention at a European level and which have been set as one of the main goals towards a fairer society.

European cultural and social model: activating individuals for economic and social growth

The Lisbon Process, launched in 2000 and re-launched in 2005 to 'make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010', revived the debate in Europe about the existence and status of the European social model (ESM) (Annesley, 2007; Ferrera *et al.*, 2001; Wagner, 2005).

The 'European Social Model', though frequently referred to in politicians' speeches, is rarely defined with any precision. Jacques Delors was one of the first to popularize the term European Social Model (ESM) in the mid-1980s by designating it as an alternative to the American form of pure-market capitalism.

Perhaps one of the clearest attempts at an official definition may be found in the Presidency Conclusions of the Nice European Council meeting of 2000. The European social model, characterised in particular by systems that offer a high level of social protection, by the importance of the social dialogue and by services of general interest covering activities vital for social cohesion, is today based, beyond the diversity of the Member States' social systems, on a common core of values.

These official statements make it clear that the term 'European social model' is to encompass more than a mere model of social policy. The documents rather make reference to embracing characteristics in the dimensions of state, economy and society (Alber, 2006; Scharpf, 2002).

The objective in the coming period must be to preserve and develop the European Social Model as we move towards the 21st century, in order to give the people of Europe the unique blend of economic wellbeing, social cohesiveness and high overall quality of life which was achieved in the post-war period. The coining of the term 'European Social Model' (ESM) in the 1990s is a manifestation of the attempt by European policymakers to shore up the social foundations of the European Union (EU).

Leibfried (1994) describes the implicit social foundations of the EU as being the high levels of skills, welfare and trust which provided the founder members of the Community with strategic advantages over their non-European competitors and maintained social peace, and which can be seen as underpinning the 'collective modernisation project' of Europe in the postwar years.

The basic idea of the ESM is that "economic and social progress must go hand in hand; economic growth, in other words, is to be combined with social cohesion" (cf Jepsen and Serrano, 2005). The ESM is not a reality in the sense in which we think of national welfare states, it is "an overarching inspirational model incorporating the broad parameters to which European welfare states conform" (cf O'Connor, 2005). It is generally used to describe the European experience of simultaneously promoting sustainable economic growth and social cohesion.

The concept of ESM has been understood as a particular set of institutions (powerful welfare state, intervening social partners, etc.); as a particular set of values with reference to which these institutions are built up, for instance, temporary postponement of individual interests in order to achieve collective gains (Vobruba, 2001) or a commitment to minimum guaranteed resources (Begg, 2002); as a particular way to deal with common problems (policy paradigms and legitimating rhetoric); but also in terms of the outcomes of these institutions and values (levels of poverty and inequality, individual/collective empowerment, economic performance, decommodification of society) (Vobruba, 2001; Room 2008).

The polysemic nature of the concept ESM results not only from the lack of discussion devoted to the concept but also from a political construction of a self-styled European social-policy identity by the EU institutions (Jepsen and Pascual, 2005).

A common assumption relates to the interlinked nature of the economic and societal dimensions: Economic success and maintaining the social quality of Europe are presented as interrelated goals. The key question in this discussion is what type of conditions, within the analytical framework of societal change, are conducive to both economic success and the social improvement of living conditions.

The European Social Model is in fact a loosely defined normative concept and, as such, is used with differing meanings in accordance with rather ambiguous definitions.

The ESM change its shape and aim from a 'a social space' to policy coordination and is constantly a work in progress; it reflects a tension between aspirations and statements of values expressed at the European level and subsidiarity (Alber, 2006; de La porte and Pochet, 2004).

This model is today facing some challenges that deal with the demographic changes with an ageing population and a shrinking working population that continue to be a major challenge in the European after enlargement.

Within the European Union policy discourse, flexible employment represents a means of reducing unemployment, increasing economic and social cohesion, maintaining economic competitiveness and enhancing equal opportunities between women and men.

Flexible employment is said to contribute to the broader objectives of growth, cohesion and equal opportunities of the EU. The EU has three key objectives (or 'three pillars'). The Single Market, Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion (European Commission, 1997a). The first two objectives are designed to increase economic growth by increasing efficiency and competitiveness. The cohesion objective, including equal opportunities between women and men, is designed to ensure that all member states and citizens benefit from the anticipated welfare gains deriving from the increased growth (Perrons 1999).

O'Connor (2005) traces the development of the European Social Model from the recognition of the right to equal pay for men and women in the Treaty of Rome to agreement of a Social Policy Agenda in 2000 and the adoption of an open method of coordination (OMC) in employment (1997), social inclusion (2000) and pensions (2002). The European Employment Strategy (EES) was created in the mid-1990s to coordinate the various attempts of member states to address the more or less persistent high levels of unemployment and low employment rates (Mailand, 2008).

The Lisbon agenda presents a coherent vision of a social model which can be characterized as a Europe-wide Adult Worker Model (AWM).

The European social model is rooted in values and fundamental rights, which evolved to form a **common ground** across the Member States, driving concrete policies. **People are at the centre** of this model. They benefit, for example, from the protection of human dignity and health, and access to social security. But the European social model is increasingly geared towards activating people by investing in their opportunities. The positive effects of this approach extend to society and the economy at large. This is why economic, employment

and social policies are mutually supportive in driving the European social model. In short: **Promoting social objectives goes hand in hand with boosting growth and jobs.** The Barcelona European Council defined the European social model as being based on good economic performance, a high level of social protection and education and social dialogue. An active welfare state should encourage people to work, as employment is the best guarantee against social exclusion.

This is a system which assumes paid employment for all adults in order to secure their economic independence. This reorientation of the European social model is a vision of a supported AWM welfare system more akin to Sweden than the United States.

The traditional ESM concentrated on promoting the welfare of a core set of citizens: the full-time, lifelong, male employees. This approach had significant implications for three groups of adults: women, older people and citizens with disabilities. With respect to women, most European models of welfare capitalism developed in the post-war era as Male Breadwinner (MBW) welfare states (Annesley, 2007; Lewis 2003, 2006). This referred to a social system which assumed full-time, lifelong employment of a male wage earner with a female being responsible for caring for children and other dependants. In the MBW welfare state, women accrued social rights via their spouse and, in the absence of a male breadwinner, for example in the event of his death, the state was willing to step in. As such, most of the original member states of the EU counted as strong MBW states.

At a European level, this type of *reframing* aims at the convergence of national welfare systems, a process which is embodied by the “*Active Welfare State*” model (AWS). This system is founded upon the concept/practice of “activation”, where the State is still construed as the central political institution in charge of creating and redistributing wealth. But, as Prandini highlights in his very interesting article, “the value system legitimising the future European order is based on the classic and modern notion of institutionalised (controlled) individualism (freedom), which stems from a combination of the liberal economic and political systems with the egalitarian tradition of Socialism. Policies are designed for adult, dependable, independent, mobile, and flexible individuals, with a high educational level, who are capable of making their way in society and reach their objectives: these individuals enjoy complete freedom in their life choices; except when their actions impinge on other people’s freedom or on the life of people who are not free to decide” (cf Prandini 2006).

The novelty of the Lisbon approach to social policy, then, is not so much the fact that the EU strongly favours labour market activation policies: developing measures to return the unemployed to the labour market. Rather, what is new in Lisbon concerns *who* is being activated in the new model of social Europe. Lisbon places an emphasis not only on activating the unemployed in an attempt to reconnect them with the labour market and reduce overall levels of unemployment, but also on activating the economically inactive (Annesley, 2007).

Lewis's analysis takes a specifically gendered approach, focusing on the impact of the emergence of the AWM on women. It is not the case that women have been absent from the labour market because they are unproductive. Given women's high educational attainment, their absence from the labour market represents a wide productivity gap. Rather, women are absent from the labour market because of the difficulties associated with combining working and family life. Bringing women into the labour market therefore requires welfare states to alter the gendered assumptions which underpinned old MBW welfare policy regimes. It is necessary to challenge the gendered assumptions of the labour market to encourage women to take employment and to support their transition from unpaid to paid work, both financially and with care services.

AWM policies aiming to promote reconciliation of work and family life, which recognize that work for some non-core employees is only possible with the support of a broader social system, have featured more prominently in the EES (European Employment Strategy) than have policies to make work pay (Annesley, 2007; Rubery, 2005). This, in part, reflects the EU's long-standing commitment to promoting gender equality and gender mainstreaming. It also reflects the policy traditions of the Nordic states – notably Sweden – which led the EES process. The emphasis is mostly on supporting women/mothers wishing to re-enter the labour market; men are included in the reconciliation agenda but not in a so strong way.

Reconciliation policies and gender equality issue in the European Social Model framework

Reconciliation is a word that was first used in the early 1990's in European Community documents to identify the principle underlying Community's directives, briefings, recommendations and suggestions addressed to Member States in order to encourage them to support family-friendly policies. Work-family reconciliation policies include all those arrangements intentionally or unintentionally promoting a balance between paid work and care responsibilities and all the strategies aimed at balancing conflicting time demands in order to reduce time conflicts in everyday life (Donati, 2005; McManus *et al.*, 2005; Parcel, 2006). Consequently, reconciliation measures are mainly designed for some critical times – such as the birth of a child or times of sickness – and to a much lesser extent for the routine management of daily life.

Issues concerning work-family balance have been recognised as being key to the achievement of equal opportunities (Byrne, 2005; Frone 2002; Hantrais and Ackers, 2005). These matters need to be addressed by means of appropriate social policies in all European Member States. Work-family reconciliation is a sensitive issue arising from the current demographic trends of populations and the care needs they originate; it has implications for a range of different policy fields like employment, labour organisation, social protection, and family policies and it mainly concerns women.

Work-family measures in different countries are the outcome of different social policies that take into account aspects related to work, gender roles, family models and different welfare strategies mentioned above. National context is relevant to work–family issues because employees’ work–family balance can be supported by national policies and programs. National gender equality reflects a society’s support for women’s development and achievements, and recognition of the importance of including women in all aspects of life.

Prior cross-cultural research has found that countries differ, for example, in beliefs about appropriate roles and behaviour for men and women; in some countries, men and women occupy highly differentiated roles based on biological sex, such as male breadwinners and female caregivers/ homemakers, whereas in other countries men and women occupy more similar or overlapping social roles. National gender equality is related to work and family issues because traditional expectations that women will be responsible for their children can be a significant barrier to women’s employment opportunities (Haas, 2003). Therefore, gender equality cannot be achieved without societal recognition of the need to provide resources and support to help employees manage both work and family responsibilities. Also, in gender egalitarian societies women are more likely to be included in decision-making roles where they can influence policies to reflect the importance of work–family issues.

Even if work-family reconciliation issues have been on the national and especially on the European political agenda – although they are treated with varying degrees of importance in different countries – in the last few years, the compelling questions arising from the relationship between these two aspects of adult identity led to increased work-family conflict and to a greater demand for actions and policies to meet work-family needs, in line with the indications of the European Masterplan.

Reconciling work and family life remains a problem (and a lonely/solitary task) for many women. For instance women with children have lower employment rates than those without; the majority of domestic work is still carried out by women; and the lack of affordable childcare remains an obstacle to equality. Women’s lower participation in the labour market means that their pension entitlements are significantly lower than those of men. Gaps between older men and women are more acute, with elderly women more at risk of poverty than men.

In order to address the new problems arising from work-family demands, European reconciliation policies are basically hinged on three pillars: “care, cash and time” (cf Millar 2006). These measure are concerned with: firstly (care), ensuring care for children and young generations through the increased provision of services and their increased suitability to different contexts; secondly (cash), financial support to families in need through cash benefits or tax breaks; thirdly (time), a better temporal organisation of family life, through the extension of parental or sick leave, and compulsory paternal leave.

These reconciliation measures, placed within a diversified context of social – or else gender or family – policies, can thus be identified, according to the different

approaches used, as: gender or equal opportunities policies; policies aimed at only one of the subjects concerned (children, women, lone women, and the elderly) and not at the family as a whole; or, finally, workfare policies, where a work-focused problem-solving approach prevails.

Lewis *et al.* (2008) explores how parents in couple families reconcile employment and child-care, and how far the current emphasis of EU-level policy on enhancing the formal provision of child-care fits with patterns and/or preferences in Western European member states. Working hours remain a very important dimension of work/family reconciliation practices, with large differences in both patterns and preferences. There is very little evidence of convergence towards a dual, full-time worker model family outside the Nordic countries, although the balance between the hours which men and women spend in paid work is becoming less unequal. The part that kin (partners and grandparents) play in providing child-care remains important in all but three countries, and, for the most part, mothers report that they are content with the amount of formal child-care available. We suggest that work/family reconciliation measures need to encompass a more extended policy package, the components of which are likely to be specific to member states.

Changes in male and female contributions to families have resulted in 'new social needs and demands, labelled 'new social risks' (cf Bonoli, 2005): notably, reconciling or combining work and care. This is now a challenge common to all European welfare states. Since the late 1990s, a prime aim of EU policy has been to get more women into employment.

Undoubtedly, each of these approaches have some strengths; however, they also contain some significant weaknesses. As a result, it would be necessary to adopt an approach to work-family reconciliation – and to the development of social and family-friendly policies – so that the wide variety of factors and stakeholders involved would be taken into account and, at the same time, the different aspects of this phenomenon (resources, objectives, local culture, and norms) would be interconnected by regarding work-family balance as a social relationship.

Critical aspects

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 cause problems.

Increasing the level of labour participation is one of the key objectives of the European Employment Strategy and the Lisbon agenda. The EES is based on the assumption that a high employment rate has a favourable impact on a number of other socio-economic indicators, including unemployment, poverty and social security dependency (Hardy and Adnett, 2002).

Increasing the employment rate is generally considered crucially important to safeguarding the sustainability of the welfare state and achieving a number of other socio-economic objectives.

In many cases, the favourable effects of increases in employment are partially (and sometimes even fully) offset by simultaneous changes in other variables, including labour supply, eligibility criteria, benefit generosity and the concentration of non-working people in work-poor households. Increasing the employment rate is not a panacea for all socio-economic ills (de Beer, 2007).

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. 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.

Many studies highlight the need for a more deepened approach to gender, family and work relationship. As we saw, in recent years great attention has been given to family well-being effects in workplace and to community studies. These push forward in order to consider the possibility to involve more social subjects in the re-definition of social policies facilitating work-family balance (Bould, 2006; Lewis, 2003; Hantrais and Ackers, 2005; Hantrais, 2004).

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

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, 2005). 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.

Lewis *et al.* (2008) suggest that a narrow policy focus is unlikely to be the answer. Countries vary enormously in terms of the nature of the existing policy package and patterns of adult labour market participation. Portuguese women express a strong preference for much more formal child-care; Dutch, German and British women are relatively satisfied with the amount they have, despite having much less developed formal provision than the Nordic countries. As matters stand, member states tend to have emphasized one element of the policy package more than others (de Henau *et al.*, 2006), which has to do with different cultures of work and care, and 'ideals of care'. Thus, different patterns of development in the work/family balance policy field are likely to be needed in different countries. Respect for parental choice is increasingly an issue with regard to the gender divisions of unpaid care work and employment, and the degree of commodification that is achieved, although the notion of choice may be distorted by political rhetoric (Ellingsaeter

and Leira, 2006; Lewis, 2007). Norms and values matter in policy making, especially in family policy (Strohmeier, 2002); it remains a problem as to how far the state should lead or follow. It is in any case particularly difficult for the European Commission to advocate a particular policy approach for all member states.

As academic commentators from various disciplines have pointed out, policies must provide for paid leaves, care services and ‘family-friendly’ working hours if reconciling work and care is to be family-centred and promote gender equality (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004; Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Leitner and Wroblewski, 2006; Lewis, 2006). However, family practices and policies are particularly influenced by norms and values (Strohmeier, 2002), and respect for choice in the intimate arena of family relationships is a sensitive area for policymakers wishing to transfer work from the unpaid to the paid labour market – to commodify labour – through more female employment and formal child-care provision.

Mapping gender equality policies has also raised the question of interventions at different levels, from individual, through household, civil society and state (Pascall and Lewis, 2004).

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.

By referring to the promotion of ‘long lasting changes in parental roles’, the EU is expressing a very radical position, well beyond the liberal agenda. It seems to imply that some of the structural barriers to gender inequality will be addressed and thus overcomes some of the limitations that have been identified in relation to past EU initiatives. Furthermore, they have been criticized for being formulated around the lowest common level of rights, which, in some cases, ironically has led to national and regional states having to abandon their more progressive equal opportunities measures under the EU equal opportunities legislation.

Practically, the question is how to promote a cultural change (an European social model) – 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 ultimate goal, however, remains a profound institutional, social and labour change, where parity could easily be accomplished in a new cultural context.

Such 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 poten-

tial 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, it seems 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 the times of everyday life or in the dissatisfaction with one's way of life.

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