

Gender inequality in family



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In this essay I would like to demonstrate that achieving a greater equality in terms of reconciliation of professional and family life requires policies that not only introduce changes in labour market patterns, but also within the private sphere of family. This is to say, the reconceptualisation of women's and men's roles cannot be achieved without the political will descending from above and common social agreement emanating from below. Further along the essay, I am going to complement the theoretical arguments with some practical examples from the European context in order to discuss to what extent family policies enhance or diminish equality between men and women.

Demographic changes - towards new family patterns

One of numerous attributes of the post-industrial era could be defined in terms of feminist claims for gender equality. Indeed, women demands have been part of policy arena in most post-industrial countries. As individuals, women firstly demanded the detachment from their traditional roles of housewives. Later on, due to demographic changes such as low fertility, women's issues became one of the top priorities on political agenda. This time, however, women reclaimed their rights not only as workers, but also as mothers. This political turn shouldn't be regarded as nostalgia for the male bread-winner model. In effect, tough conditions of labour market and economic hardship put women under pressure in terms of making a trade-off between having a family and pursuing a professional career. Subsequently, since a large proportion of women opted for stability - employment rather than precariousness - providing free care, the fertility rate has started dropping rapidly. Since the society's reproduction buttresses future state's

economy, it remains highly questionable if national policies, originally purported to tackle gender inequality, are not more likely to be driven by political preoccupation of deleterious consequences of low fertility on productivity, profitability and competitiveness of a country. The fact that until today most of the political effort to eradicate gender equality concentrated on labour market adjustments rather than finding real answers in the core of the problem in family patterns confirms the hypothesis of governments' hypocrisy.

From the theoretical perspective

Although welfare regimes have been more or less successful in equalizing men and women in the labour market, the fact that women still perform the bulk of domestic work gives evidence about the ineffectiveness of these policies in terms of gender equity. In the theoretical field, scholars' positions towards the relationship between family and gender have been rather convergent.

According to Daly and Lewis (2000) the relationship between family and state has used to be defined in terms of level of contribution of individual to the labour market. Taking this criterion as a universal measure of human's contribution, the non-remunerated care giving activities would be therefore omitted since their social value would be considered as negligible. Although this definition would probably more likely correspond to the definition traditional society of industrial era, residues do persist in Western countries persist in form of assigning women to the private sphere of family, while stressing the duties of men as the bread-winners and therefore, the only actors in the public sphere. In tandem with the disproportional relationship

between men and women, Lewis (2002: 332), for instance, highlights the unequal relationship between women and labour market. She contends that women are only taken into account when working, whereas women that stay at home and care for children have not being recognized as legitimate enough to the contribution to the society. This is to say that despite the fact that female participation on the labour market increased steadily during the last twenty years, no considerable change has been achieved at the household level, where the majority of domestic tasks, including cleaning and child rearing activities, continues to be performed by women (Lewis, 2002).

On a similar note, Fraser(1994) tries to define the post-industrial welfare regimes through two models. The ' universal caregiver model' (1994: 593) assumes men and women as autonomous individuals and aims to attain the gender equity through the guarantee of equal opportunities and equal treatment in the labour market. The other one - ' Caregiver parity model' (1994: 593) - aims to reach gender equity through the support of informal care and generous caregiver allowances. However, because both models are in some aspect discriminating, they fail to alter the gendered conditions of employment and reproduction and therefore, to respond to women's demands. Fraser thus deems that gender equity can only be achieved through the dismantlement of ' gender opposition between breadwinning and caregiving' (Fraser, 1994: 611). In other words, ' the key to achieving gender equity in a postindustrial welfare state is to make women's current patterns the norm' (Ibid.). Fraser's universal caregiver approach considers

childcare responsibilities as the alpha omega of persistent gender inequalities of current welfare systems.

Peter McDonald (2002) suggests that in societies where women are treated as autonomous individuals in education and labour market, but as inferior beings in other social male - dominated institutions, they are more likely to opt to not to have children. This argument would reinforce his hypothesis that low fertility rate in industrialized countries is most probably due to a persistent gender inequalities since the women willingness to have children didn't change. Surveys such as those conducted by McDonald and Fraser place the issues of childcare at the centre of recent policy making interest.

For the reasons discussed above, challenges Western societies are facing since the last two decades - specifically the low birth rate, longevity risk and ageing population problem - have become more pronounced and have force the policy- making authorities to introduce changes not only in the public sphere, but also in the private sphere. In the second part of my essay, I am going to provide some empirical support from Netherlands and Sweden which tried to tackle the low fertility with gender neutral policies premised on reconciliation of family and work lives.

Reconciliation policies in EU

In 1997, the Dutch government launched the 'Combination Scenario' programme aimed to promote equal sharing of time between paid and unpaid work among men and women. Since the Dutch culture is based on strong attachment to private and informal care (Platenga et al., 1999), the policy goal was to be achieved through widening employment patterns

rather than providing extensive childcare services. Long male and short female working hours were supposed to be equalized through policies such as shorter working week. Nonetheless, whereas public opinion hailed new measures, outcomes of the latter remained far from the initial goal. Part-time contract did not diminish men's working hours, but moreover, it even pronounced the inequality of labour market since women (and not men) continued to opt for part-time contracts in order to care for their children. Platenga et al. therefore conclude:

'...an increase in the amount of time spent in the market without any corresponding change in the organization of unpaid work will not only slow down any progress made towards gender equality, but will also have detrimental effects on the quality of our lives.' (1999: 109)

Here again, the failure of Dutch initiative could be a consequence of putting too much emphasis into the promotion of changes in employment patterns rather than in equal distribution of care time. Some authors suggest that such working-time regimes can either promote or diminish gender equality (Rubery et al, 1998 in Platenga et al, 1999). This would depend on to what extent the institutions and political environment are favourable toward these changes. In the Dutch case, despite the public willingness of change, part-time work continued to be considered as a deviation from full-time norm as well as the care work persisted to be understood as women's responsibility and was therefore, undervalued (Platenga et al., 1999)

Unlike other EU countries, Sweden, for instance, has a long history of active women participation in public sphere. Since 1970 women represented up to

50% of elected representatives at all levels of governance (Hantrais, 2000). The women -friendliness of Nordic welfare systems is supposed to be premised on this active female participation in politics. The Nordic model, also called the dual-breadwinner model is women-friendly in the sense of allowing women to participate in public life and on the same time, allowing the reconciliation of motherhood and paid work. Moreover, in 1974 the maternity leave had been replaced by gender neutral parental leave that hitherto enabled men to actively participate in child rearing (Ibid). Although the generosity of Nordic child subventions can't be disputed, Scandinavian welfare system can be also discriminating for some women. Shalev (2008) claims that mother friendly state interventions can have detrimental effects for the labour market attainments of high class women by relegating their type of employment to the public sector and subsequently, limiting their access to high managerial positions.

Premised on the idea that childhood determines people's lifecourse, the post-industrial societies should consider the investment in children as a sine qua non for sustainable development of knowledge economy (Esping-Andersen, 2002). However, due to the cultural differences, the debate about whether support for childcare should be provided through childcare allowances (Netherlands) or whether families should rather benefit from childcare facilities (Sweden) dominates the European agenda. Lewis (2006) contends that increasing attention to children in the political agenda is a result of their future role as adult citizens rather than their role as 'child qua child' (Lewis, 2006: 43). As a counter-argument, Esping-Andersen concludes that there is no empirical evidence that mother's work could have

detrimental impact on children's development (Esping-Andersen, 2002).

Other authors, however, suggest that key success of equal gender treatment consists in concentrating in private sphere instead of putting too much effort into the public sphere (Lewis 2006, McDonald 2002). In opposition to the Nordic model, where parents benefit from extensive childcare facilities, some authors deem that care provided by parents themselves cannot be substituted by any public service no matter how good it is (Folbre and Nelson, 2000). In addition to this, Etzioni (1993) deems that the transmission of informal values and norms is more likely to happen in private sphere of family. Subsequently, children socialized in childcare facilities would suffer from lack of so-called 'parental deficit' (Ibid).

From the theoretical debate it is difficult and inappropriate to make generalizations about what kind of care is more suitable for children. On the other hand, Lewis argues convincingly that evidence shows a shift in parents opinion about time spent with children from being assumed as a duty to as an important part of self-fulfilment (Lewis, 2006). This is also to say that more fathers have begun to consider their involvement in rearing activities. In Sweden, the 'father's month', designed to convince more fathers to take up the parental insurance benefit, was backed up by important political support of so-called 'fathers group' that campaigned for men to perform their role as fathers in taking the parental leave (Hantrais, 2000: 170-1).

Successful strategies to tackle gender equality and reconcile work and family life, need to include 'combined strategies' (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 66) that would guarantee security through income assurance for those who want to take parental leave and also, measures to provide a stable support for

mothers' employment, since unemployed and single mothers face the highest poverty risk (European Commission, 2007).

Monoparental families at the edge of poverty

Despite measures intended to secure access to women into the labour market, solo mothers and lone-parent households continue to be the most vulnerable cohort in term of facing the risk of poverty and unemployment. By the same means, exclusion and poverty in lone-parents household is more likely to become a long-term phenomenon, since children's development depends on parental and social investment and is very likely to be reproduced (Esping-Andersen, 2002). Following the Report enacted by European Commission, women constitute almost totality of lone parents with an exception of United Kingdom, Denmark, Poland and Germany, where the percentage of young fathers under age 35 varies from 17% (United Kingdom) up to 25% (in Denmark) (EC, 2007: 3). The singleness of lone mothers makes their position in society extremely vulnerable: unlike other forms of family, solo mothers face the double pressure to combine child care and breadwinner responsibilities on the same time.

Although some critique could be raised towards Scandinavian welfare systems, Nordic countries occupy the top positions of international rankings and this is unconditionally of the type of conducted survey. However, the application of this model to the rest of European countries would require deep structural changes, especially in terms of more generous budget. Ergo, in the European continental context of scarce budget resources, lone mothers that opt for childcare benefits instead of paid employment, condemn themselves to be more vulnerable to poverty. The key issue to

avoid this scenario stems from securing enough flexibility of labour market, so that lone mothers can combine the pleasure of motherhood with a decent employment.

Conclusion

In this essay I tried to demonstrate that increased individualization which considers men and women as autonomous individuals freed from their family and gender responsibilities does not suffice to guarantee equal conditions for every individual. Subsequently, women become more vulnerable and risk either exclusion from welfare either pressure from labour market. From the theoretical perspective, most of the authors agree that assuring reliable security net requires adjustments of social and working structures to the family, and not to the market. For example, one of the positive outcomes of the Netherlands' Combination Scenario had been the application of legal minimum wage to all employees regardless of the amount of working hours (Platenga et al., 1999). This is to say that in order to avoid men's and women's occupational segregation, policy-making authorities should guarantee sufficient adjustment of child care allowances and employment policies so both, men and women can equally contribute to paid and unpaid work.