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Abstract

Childcare has become a much-debated issue in all developed countries. Who should care for children, how, how much and for how long are the questions at the centre of value conflicts that shape not only policies and struggles around policies, but also individual and family choices. This article contributes to the debate in two ways. First, it presents an up-to-date overview of the different childcare packages offered by the 27 EU countries, indicating how they represent quite different understandings of proper care, as well as of proper behaviour by mothers and fathers. Second, it attempts to unravel the different dimensions implicated in the debate, going beyond the simplification of the mother's care vs non-family care dichotomy. It concludes that an integrated research agenda, focusing both on the outcomes for labour markets and for children's well-being, is necessary in order to develop policies that address the complex issues of choice, rights and social inequality involved in child-caring patterns.

Keywords

childcare, childcare policies, gender roles, working mothers

Premise

Debates about what is the proper care setting for very young children are increasingly entering the public/political arena. National and supranational bodies, such as the European Union, set specific targets that simultaneously regard women's labour force participation rates and childcare coverage by collective services, thus joining the already numerous – though disparate – norm-setting groups in this field: churches, child psychologists, paediatricians and experts of all kinds, including grandmothers and mothers-in-law.

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There has always been tension, conflict and negotiation around the question as to who should care for young children. But this friction used to remain implicit in the public sphere, instead being acted out at the microlevel of interpersonal relations and everyday organization and decision-making by parents (mothers) against the background of available opportunities, experts' advice and constraints, as well as own preferences and values. In recent years, however, contrasting positions have gained public visibility. National governments and international organizations (EU, OECD) have explicitly or implicitly formulated a kind of normative model both for mothers' behaviour and for childcare that supersedes those established until recently by policies (or the lack of them) in many countries, as well those held by many parents. Mothers are increasingly expected to participate in the labour market; fathers are increasingly expected to be involved in the care of very young children; children are increasingly expected to be partly cared for in non-family formal settings from a very young age onwards (UNICEF, 2008).

These developments, on the one hand, raise the issue of the degree to which there should be a publicly enforced or sponsored normative model for childcare, particularly in the face of the growing value attributed to freedom of choice in individualized and multicultural societies. On the other hand, they open the way to a discussion about the different dimensions involved in addressing the childcare needs of very young children: mothers' labour market participation in societies where the nuclear household is the prevalent household pattern, the gender division of labour in parental responsibilities, workplace demands and expectations and social and family inequalities among children.

In order to address these various dimensions, I pull together strands of literature, research and debates that are usually separated into specialized fields and around distinct topics: mothers' labour force participation and work–family reconciliation policies, equal opportunities between men and women, inequalities among children and child poverty. My focus is mostly on the EU27 and Norway, since this is a political and cultural area where childcare policies have a longer tradition and in many cases (e.g. maternity and parental leave) are statutory. Moreover, it is an area which is increasingly regulated at both the legal and discursive supranational level.

I first describe the different publicly supported childcare packages offered by the EU countries in the form of various combinations of leave and state-funded services. My aim is to discuss the implicit and explicit assumptions on how best to meet the care needs of preschool children embodied in these different packages and the specific risks for children's welfare and for inequalities among children. Against this background, I discuss the many unexamined assumptions that inform both the debate and much research on childcare preferences and on the impact of a working mother and of (also) receiving non-family care when very young on a child's well-being. In so doing, I also discuss how these debates address the issue of social inequality among mothers, families and children. In the conclusion, I tie together these various themes and argue that childcare needs and the issue of proper childcare cannot be reduced to a simplistic alternative between family (mother's) care and non-family care. On the contrary, they involve multiple dimensions and actors. Both policies and research should therefore take more seriously the multilayered and differentiated context in which childcare needs arise.

The politics and policies of childcare in Europe: An overview

Across the EU, the items that make up public social-care packages for preschool children differ widely (see also Del Boca and Wetzels, 2007; Hantrais, 2004). This concerns length and compensation of maternity leave (although the 1996 European Parental Leave Directive has set a minimum threshold for both dimensions), length and compensation of parental leave, whether and in what form the latter is opened up to fathers (and in some countries, such as Bulgaria and Hungary, also to grandparents), coverage through services for children aged under three and coverage through services for children aged three to school age. Further differences are found regarding school-age children, whose need for care and supervision does not end when they enter primary school and is met by quite dissimilar modes of organization by and around schools. These combinations, on the one hand, create different options for parents (mothers) and different possible experiences for children. On the other, they define different responsibilities between mothers and fathers, and between families and society. Figures 1 and 2, based on data collected for the EU-funded Multilinks project (Multilinks, 2009; Saraceno and Keck, 2008; Saraceno and Keck, 2010), show the substantial breadth of some these differences (length of leave and childcare coverage).

There are important cross-country variations regarding both overall length, and duration and level of compensation of maternity and parental leave, on the one hand (see also Wall, 2007), and childcare coverage through services for children aged under three, on the other, confirming that this is an area where there is no consensus across countries. On

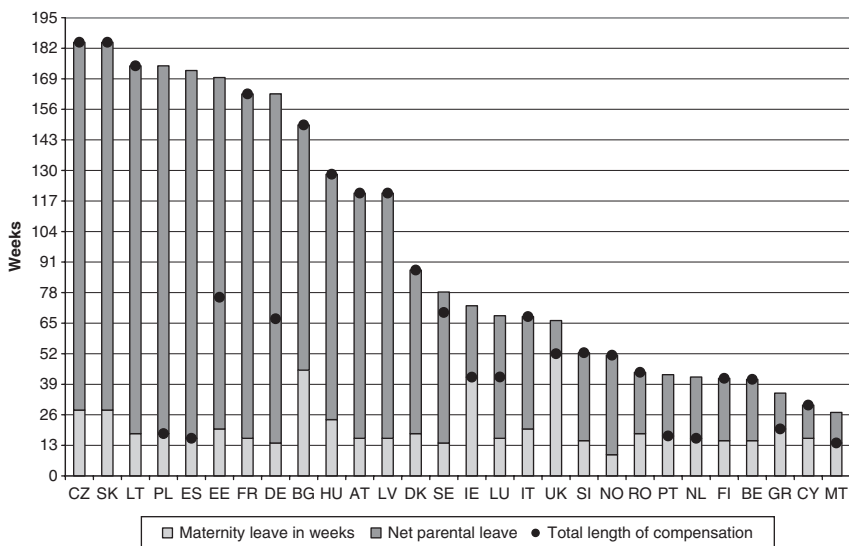


Figure 1. Length of maternity and parental leave in weeks and total level of compensation, irrespective of level of compensation in the EU and Norway; data from around 2007
Source: Saraceno and Keck (2008), on the basis of various sources (Keck et al., 2009).

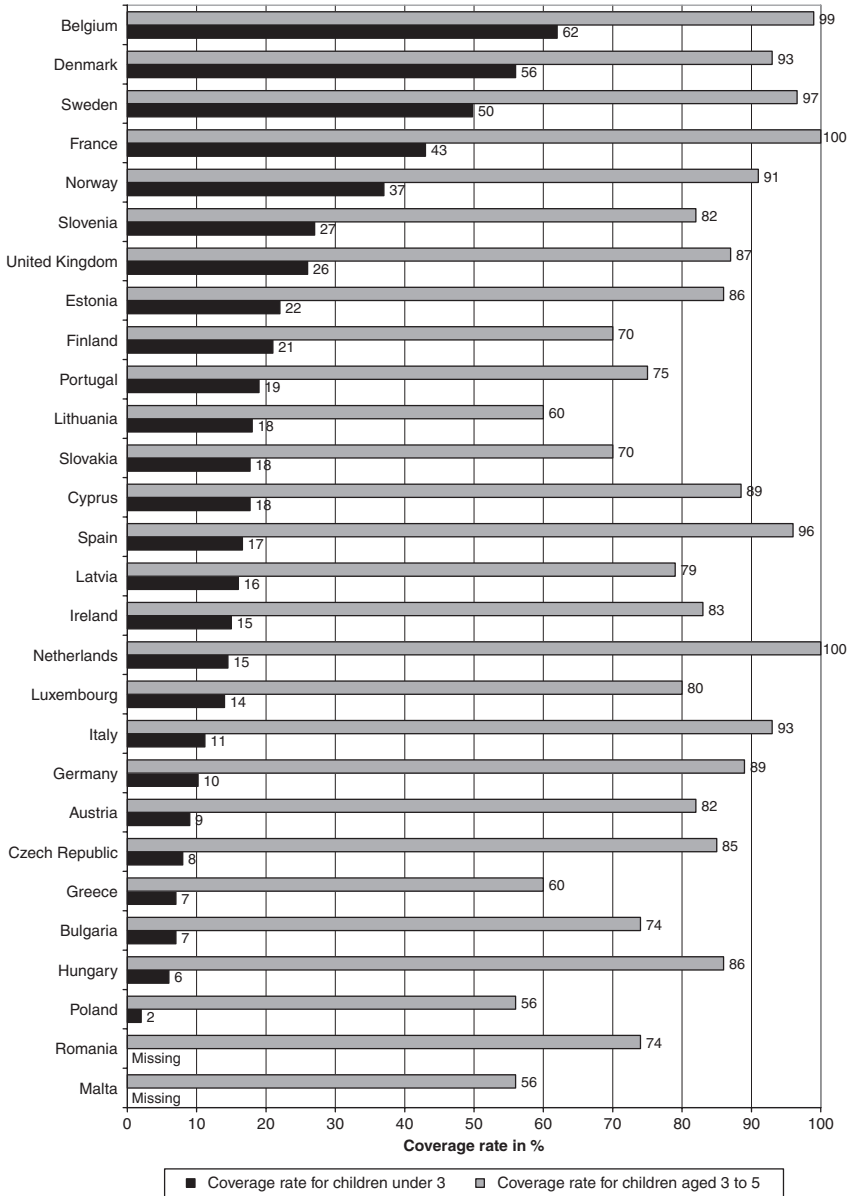


Figure 2. Childcare coverage (through publicly provided or supported services only) in the EU and Norway for children under three and between three and school age; data from around 2007
Source: Keck et al. (2009).

the contrary, the wide coverage of services for children aged three to school age indicates that for this age bracket some kind of formal, non-family care and education is framed as a normal, even necessary, experience and resource for growing up, irrespective of the

parents' working status. The partial exceptions are Ireland, with coverage below 50 percent, and Malta and Poland, whose coverage is less than 60 percent. Another difference is the availability or not of an incentivizing, specially reserved quota of parental leave for fathers, thus increasing both overall parental caring time and specifically fathers' time (Leira, 2006). This quota exists in various forms in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden.

Because leave and services for children of working parents and particularly working mothers represent two different ways of dealing with the caring needs of very young children (under-threes), it is important to see how the overall package is organized in each country and how much is left to families (and through them to the market) with no support whatsoever. In order to do so, not only the length of leave, but also the levels of compensation must be taken into account, since a long leave with little or no compensation does allow time off paid work, but at a very high financial cost, particularly when a family is growing. For this reason, in order to assess 'effective leave' in terms of compensation,¹ the duration of leave was weighted on the basis of the compensation level, taking as a reference the average wage in each country. Figure 3 offers a synthetic overview of the different ways policies frame family and public responsibilities for the care of preschool children.

The greatest difference concerns the degree to which parents (mothers) are left with no kind of support in their responsibility to care for their children, particularly in the first three years of life. Poland, Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, Portugal, Spain and – to a lesser degree – the Netherlands are the countries where support of any kind is least available for children under three. In Poland this is also true for children aged three to six. These are the countries where mothers have fewer options and where exclusive family/mother care is normative not because of explicit incentives, but because of a lack of publicly financed alternatives. The only alternatives are the market (for those who can afford it) and extended family solidarity (grandmothers, if they are available). Another clear message that emerges from Figure 3 is that not only are there quite different levels of overall publicly supported coverage of young children's care needs across the EU, but the same level of coverage may be obtained through diverse means, that is, through different combinations of paid leaves and services. This in turn shapes different models of addressing childcare needs (see also Mahon, 2002). The countries with the longest effective leave all belong to the former Communist bloc. The long leave periods in these countries might represent both a reaction to negative experiences with childcare services in the past combined with long working hours for parents, and a way of dealing with unemployment. These countries, however, do not offer any incentive to fathers to take at least part of the leave. Given the prevalent gender division of labour in families, as well as gender-specific cultural models that were left unchanged during the Communist regimes with regard to responsibilities for care and domestic work (e.g. ILO, 1980; Robila, 2004), this lack of incentives implicitly supports a strong gender division of responsibilities between mothers and fathers. Coupled with the encouragement to take long leave, this may result in a long-term negative impact on mothers' chances in the labour market and on poverty risks for households and children.

The different combinations of care arrangements presented in Figure 3 only partly overlap with patterns of women's/mothers' labour market participation, so that we may find high levels of women's labour force participation in countries, such as Portugal, where effective leave is short and services scarce. Clearly, in this case, it is the extended

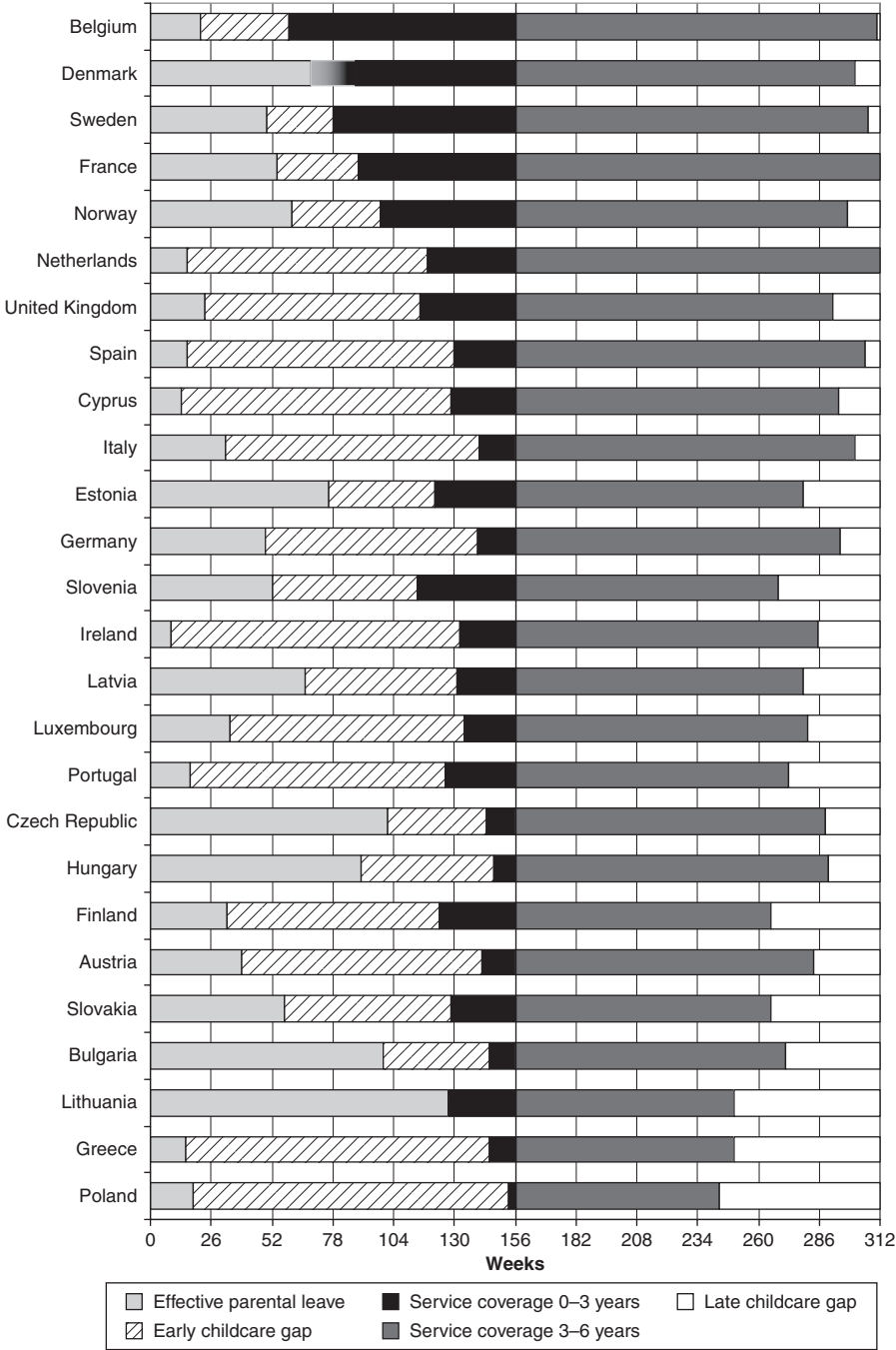


Figure 3. Childcare coverage through 'effective leave' and publicly financed services, in working weeks, EU and Norway 2003-7

Source: Multilinks (2009); Keck et al. (2009). Data for Romania and Malta are unavailable.

family that supports working mothers. There is also an expanding formal and informal care market (Wall, 2008). The role of the extended family, together with that of a growing formal care market, is also important in Italy (Blome et al., 2009), where women's labour force participation is lower than the European average, but involves over half of all mothers of small children and is mostly full-time. Contrast this with the Netherlands, where mothers mostly work part-time, and also Sweden and Norway (though not Denmark and Finland), where mothers often temporarily shift to long part-time work, returning to full-time positions when the child is older (e.g. Lewis et al., 2008).

In other words, substantial coverage through effective leave and services supports conciliation between paid work and childcare for women, since it encourages women's labour force participation while at the same time offering childcare support. But the reverse is not always true. Also, when coverage is scant, mothers may decide or need to be in paid work and then be obliged to find other (family, or formal or informal market solutions) for childcare while they are at work. Furthermore, combining work and care may involve different combinations: part-time use of non-family care with part-time work, full-time use of non-family care with full-time work, various combinations of non-parental with parental care and so forth.

The picture becomes even more complex if childcare allowances are considered. In some countries, in fact, at the end of the parental leave period, an option is formally given between receiving an allowance to stay at home to care for one's own child or using non-family childcare. This is the case in Finland, Norway, Belgium, Austria, Greece and (from the second child onwards) France. This approach is currently being discussed in Germany. These allowances are usually a flat rate and much lower than the average wage. Not everywhere do they also include social security coverage and pension contributions. As Leira (1998) has observed, these allowances represent quite a distinct and to some degree opposite approach to that represented not only by services but also by fathers' quotas in parental leave. Services and fathers' quotas promote a dual-earner/dual-carer model, while carer allowances, although couched in gender-neutral terms, de facto strengthen mothers' role as the main carers. Care allowances may also strengthen social class differences among mothers and their children, insofar as it is more likely that low-income rather than high-income mothers will opt to stay at home to care in exchange for the (comparatively low) allowance. They may also strengthen the informal care market, since the allowance may be used to pay for informal care.

The different policy packages, together with the different strategies developed by families and particularly by mothers to deal with childcare needs, result in different experiences and also risks for women and children. From the point of view of women's labour force participation and fathers' participation in care-giving, existing research indicates, first, that the longer and the less compensated the leave, the more it is feminized (even when in theory it is also open to fathers) and the more it produces polarized behaviours among women, mostly based on social class/education (e.g. Korpi, 2000; UNICEF, 2008, for an overview). Second, the longer the leave actually taken by one parent – de facto the mother – the more difficult it is for her to re-enter the labour market and in any case the higher the so-called 'child penalty' (Del Boca and Wetzels, 2007; Gornick and Meyers, 2003). Third, specifically with regard to fathers' involvement in early childcare, it is not enough to allow fathers to take part of the parental leave. If there is not a 'use it

or lose it' quota, they are not likely to take leave (also because their entitlement is weaker in the eyes of employers). Leave-taking among Swedish and Norwegian fathers substantially increased when the 'use it or lose it' rule was introduced. In Denmark, where this rule has been abolished, fathers tend not to take any leave, although the level of compensation is very similar to that in the other two Scandinavian countries (Morgan, 2008). In Italy, where there is a 'use it or lose it' rule, but compensation for parental leave is low (only 30 percent of lost pay), fathers rarely take it. Fourth, the possibility to use parental leave in a flexible and part-time way encourages both leave-sharing among parents and mothers' labour market attachment, also reducing the demand for (particularly full-time) care for very young children. Fifth, the cost of childcare affects usage more among low- than high-income families, although there are cross-country variations depending on degree of coverage (Del Boca and Vuri, 2006). Subsidized care, therefore, has an important redistributive effect. Finally, the quality of childcare, together with its quantity, strongly affects legitimization and acceptance.

Should mothers of young children work? Behaviours and preferences in context

The idea that there may be a conflict between young children's needs and mothers' labour market participation is the result of complex sociohistorical developments. On the one hand, there is the historical 'discovery of childhood' – dating before psychoanalysis and child psychology (Ariès, 1962) – as a specific stage of life with its attendant needs. This discovery initially only changed the lives of children of the higher classes. But in the second half of the 20th century, childhood as a protected stage of life became a widespread value across social classes and in many countries was intertwined with the 'invention' of motherhood as a specific and overarching role. At the same time, the development of the industrial economy and the social organization of paid work, together with the development of the nuclear family, made it more difficult for women to combine childcare with working – as many women of the peasant and working classes had done for centuries. This development also contributed to separating the world and needs of the workplace from those of the family and particularly from the needs of care-receiving and care-giving. The creation of the male-breadwinner family, where fathers were removed from any responsibility for the care of children and mothers removed from participation in the labour market, was both the consequence and the means of this separation (Crouch, 1999; Moen and Roehling, 2005; Saraceno, 1997). Incompatibility between mothers' paid work and children's care and relational needs was therefore the outcome of both the organization of paid work and the gender division of work within the household. Both these dimensions must be addressed not only in order to overcome this incompatibility, but also in order to critically understand why childcare and relational needs are framed almost exclusively as concerning mothers and not also fathers, and why only mothers' and not fathers' paid work is perceived as possibly harmful for children's well-being. In fact, a non-working father is more likely to be perceived as a liability for his child/ren.

There are several grounds on which one may criticize an idea of gender equality based on giving women the opportunity to adopt what are prevalently male behaviours and priorities. But similar criticisms may be levied against the idea of male (fathers') behaviour

and priorities as ontologically given and immutable and of fathers' care as irrelevant for a child's well-being (as implicitly suggested, among others, by Gilbert [2008] and, in a more problematic way, by Pleck [2007] and to some degree also by Esping Andersen [2009]). Of course, given the prevalent gender division of family responsibilities, any study will find that fathers' participation in paid work does not negatively affect children's well-being, while, on the contrary, fathers' unemployment may have a negative impact. In addition, there is not (yet) empirical evidence that demonstrates the benefits of receiving a father's care. But this does not demonstrate per se that fathers' care is irrelevant and that shared parental care is not an adequate substitute for mother-only care.

Many feminist scholars have criticized the European employment policy and the work–family conciliation discourse specifically because, with its narrow focus on women's employment participation, it downplays the quality and organization of work, on the one hand, and time for caring and the quality of non-family care, on the other (see e.g. Knijn and Ostner, 2008; Lewis, 2006; Saraceno, 2008; Stratigaki, 2004). Mothers' increasing labour market participation in all developed countries, in fact, unbalances the organization of both the market and the family premised on the male-breadwinner/female-carer model. Simply integrating mothers into the labour market without changing the rules of that complex organization is bound to create tension. This is clearly visible in the way having a small child affects women's labour market participation, as shown in Figure 4. Furthermore, even when mothers do not altogether exit the labour force when they have one or more children, they still often work part-time, either temporarily (e.g. in the Scandinavian countries) or on a long-term basis, as happens more often in the Netherlands, Germany and the UK.

But the cross-country differences are as great as the gender differences. In addition to the impact of childcare and work–family conciliation policies, explanations point to differences in national family and gender cultures. Historical and sociological studies, for instance, have documented the different degrees to which households are embedded in

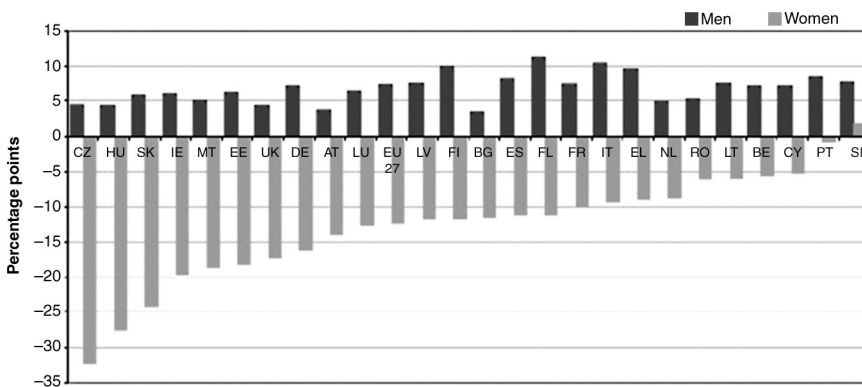


Figure 4. Employment impact of parenthood for men and women with and without children < 6 years, Europe 2007

Source: 2007 EU Labour Force Surveys, provisional data, Sweden and Denmark not available.

kin networks across Europe, exemplified, among other things, by the different degree of geographical proximity between children's and parents' households (see e.g. Kalmijn and Saraceno, 2008; Reher, 1998; Saraceno, 2007). This explains the higher availability of grandparental support in dealing with childcare needs in the Southern European countries, which allows Portuguese mothers, for instance, to remain in the labour force when they have a small child even though formal childcare services are scarce.

Comparative survey data also offer some evidence of the existence of nationally specific gender cultures. In the 1999 European Value Survey, the level of moderate or strong agreement with the – overly generic² – statement, 'a preschool child is likely to suffer if the mother works', ranged from over 80 percent in Malta, Austria and Italy, to 17 percent in Denmark. Only in 10 countries out of 30 did fewer than 50 percent of respondents agree. These included, in addition to Denmark and with substantially higher levels of agreement, Sweden, Finland, Ireland, the UK, the Netherlands, Spain, Slovenia, Romania and the Czech Republic. The 2006 European Social Survey, conducted in a smaller number of countries, requested a response to a somewhat different and more specific statement: 'How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman has a full-time job while she has children aged under 3?' In this case, too, the variation is very high, ranging from 58 percent of disapproval in Ukraine and Switzerland to 16–17 percent in Finland, Cyprus and Denmark (see Figure 5). Interestingly, the Netherlands and Romania, which in the more generic European Value Survey question showed a high level of disagreement with the idea that a preschool child would suffer if the mother works, give a much less positive evaluation when confronted with a very small child and a full-time job in the European Social Survey. The perceived alternative seems, therefore, not to be between working and not working, but to be between working full-time or part-time. Morgan (2008) also found that in most countries only a minority – albeit gradually increasing – of respondents agree that a mother of a preschool child might work full-time without impeding on her child's well-being. It should be noted, however, that both in the European Value Survey and in the European Social Survey the percentage of respondents who answer neither/nor to these questions is substantial and in some case, as shown in Figure 5, greater than that of those who approve, indicating that opinions are far from being neatly divided into supporters and opponents.

The same statement in the European Social Survey, when referred to a man with a child under three working full-time, not surprisingly did not yield a comparable level of differentiation. Percentages of disapproval ranged from less than 5 percent in Denmark to around 15–17 percent in Ukraine, Slovenia, Switzerland Austria and Bulgaria. Cross-country differences are larger in the percentage of respondents who neither agree nor disagree, suggesting that also with regard to the impact of fathers' caring on a child's well-being there may be a less univocal view than assumed. This insight is also supported by national data on behaviour and time use, which show that in recent years fathers of infants have been taking care of their children more often than 10 years ago, although not always cutting their working time but instead their free time in order to do so (e.g. on Italy see Bruzzese and Romano, 2006).

Neither differences in policies nor differences in family and gender cultures, however, fully explain either the similarities or differences shown in Figure 5. They do not explain,

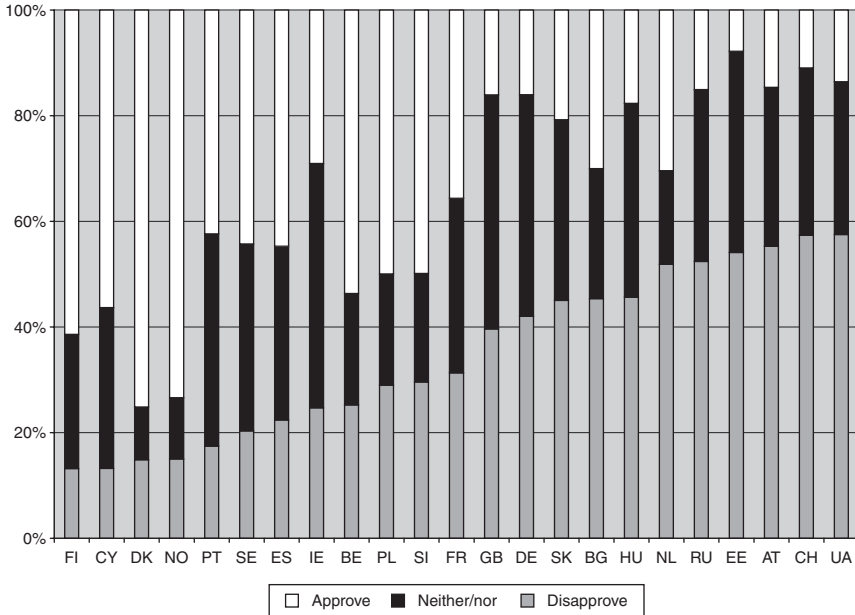


Figure 5. Approval/disapproval of a woman with a child under three having a full-time job
Source: European Social Survey 2006.

for instance, the difference between Portugal, on the one hand, and Spain and Italy, on the other, or the similarity between Italy and the Netherlands or the high negative impact of having a small child in many of the former Communist countries, where women have high labour force participation rates and where the extended family is more widespread than elsewhere (Saraceno, 2007).

Kangas and Rostgaard (2007), based on the 2002 International Social Survey data on seven European countries with different childcare arrangements, conclude that, of course, opinions matter, including those of the male partners. But opinions are constrained by opportunity structures, which are not the same for all women across different countries. Opportunities, in turn, depend not only on characteristics such as social class or education, but also on the actual availability of day care. Lewis et al. (2008), based again on the European Social Survey data, further develop this argument, taking into consideration not only the availability of formal, but also informal care. They argue that cross-country differences are the outcome of a mixture of structural options both in the labour market and in social policies, of national (and social-group specific) cultural values concerning mothers' obligations and children's needs, of the relevance of kin networks and particularly of grandmothers, and so forth. Further research is needed to unravel these different dimensions at the comparative level.

Together with cross-national differences on the impact of having a very young child, there are also intra-national class differences. The negative impact of having a

young child on women's labour force participation is greater, within each country, for low-income, low-educated women (Crompton, 2006; Esping Andersen, 2009). It is difficult to explain this, following Hakim (2000), simply in terms of different individual preferences. They seem rather to be socially structured preferences, based both on individual inclinations and on the complex system of labour market conditions, class and gender-specific local cultures, class and gender-specific options, resources and constraints (see e.g. Crompton, 2006).

Two English studies (Duncan and Irwin, 2004; Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004), based on in-depth qualitative interviews, disagree with the idea of 'autonomous' subjectivities oriented only by values and show that there is, on the contrary, interdependence between subjectivities and context, and class-specific social relations. They found that mothers experience both internal (values, personal identities) and external constraints (the household's economic circumstances, working time) on their decisions concerning whether to leave or reduce their paid working time when they have a small child. They also found that neither external circumstances nor identities were fixed. Rather, behaviour and identities were adjusted to each other, giving rise to feedback effects at both the individual and the social levels. Among the constraints, also fathers' (non-)availability to care for their children must be considered. Again, further comparative research on these issues is needed.

Finally, it should be pointed out that a mother's participation in paid work does not necessarily imply a strong reduction in time devoted to caring and developing a relationship with her children – for at least two different reasons. First, working mothers often reduce the time they devote to household chores and social activities in order to have more time for their children. Second, when the mother is in paid work, fathers are more often involved in childcare and generally in activities with children. Thus, the children of working mothers have the benefit of a higher presence of fathers in their lives than children whose mothers are not in paid work (e.g. Bianchi, 2000; Bianchi and Raley, 2005; Sayer et al., 2004). Of course, once again, it is an issue of timing, and therefore of the most adequate length of parental leave, but also of time and of quality of work, as well as of overall resources: overly long working hours, overly tiring jobs, too many financial preoccupations – all of these strongly restrict the possibility of spending relaxed and serene time with one's own children. Ascribing every possible damage to children to the simple fact that the 'mother works' is a very simplistic way of looking at the context in which parents and children live and develop their relationships. It must be added that when mothers are not in paid work, they do not necessarily devote all their time to children. Caring for and watching over children is often mixed with other activities: household chores, shopping, time with friends and so forth.

Symmetrically, non-mother care may occur in a variety of settings and by a variety of actors. Together with formal services (provided by the state or the market), grandparents, other family members, privately paid babysitters and so forth may be involved, sometimes in alternation and sometime in combination. The availability of these resources is national, but also culture and family specific. It is shaped by public policies and by the marketing of services, but also by demography, by patterns of geographical proximity, cultural family and intergenerational models, as well as a family's economic means.

Should mothers of small children work? The issue of child poverty

We have seen that mothers are expected (and expect from themselves) to take the responsibility (and pleasure) of responding to the care and relational needs of small children, rearranging their modes of participation in the labour market. This, however, creates not only gender inequality in the labour market and in economic relationships within the couple, it also creates specific risks of poverty for mothers and children.

Mothers' labour market participation is, as a matter of fact, one of the most important means for protecting children from poverty. Although living in a household where no adult is in paid work presents the highest risk of poverty for children, the majority of children who are poor live in a household where at least one adult is in work (Danzinger and Haveman, 2001; UNICEF, 2007). Having both parents in paid work protects households and children from the loss of work by one parent, from inadequacy of individual work income and also from one of the main causes of children's poverty in many countries: partnership/marriage break-up. Gornick (2004), for instance, found that in the OECD countries she studied, the lower the share of the household income controlled (i.e. earned/owned) directly by the mother, the higher the vulnerability of children (as well as of mothers) to poverty. Moller and Misra (2005) found that the incidence of poverty among mothers and children, and particularly among lone mothers and their children, is lower in countries that actively support mothers' participation in paid work through a combination of paid leave and childcare services.

Policies have addressed the issue of lone mothers' higher vulnerability to poverty in two ways: (1) granting special protection and financial support to lone mothers defined as mainly carers, also exempting them from the requirement to be available for work when receiving social assistance; and (2) strongly encouraging and supporting them to work for pay, therefore to become breadwinners. In some countries, such as the UK, the Netherlands and in part Germany, where the first approach was once prevalent, in the last decade there has been a substantial shift from the first to the second approach. The requirement to be available for work has been tightened and the age of the youngest child that exempts from this requirement has been lowered (e.g. Knijn et al., 2007; Rowlingson and Millar, 2001). A similar move occurred in the US with the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Chaudry, 2004). In this case, the need for alternative, non-family, affordable and qualitatively acceptable childcare arrangements is created by policies themselves.

The impact on children's well-being of non-family care and the issue of social inequality

Protecting children from poverty also protects them from inequalities among children in cognitive development and health, which many studies have found to be associated with living in poor households and environments, although the underlying mechanisms are complex (e.g. Gregg et al., 2007; Waldfogel, 2002). Empirical evidence on the outcome for overall children's well-being of attending formal childcare services when very young, however, presents a nuanced picture. Overall (see Loeb et al., 2007; Waldfogel, 2002,

2010: Chs 4 and 6; also the overview in UNICEF, 2008), they stress the importance of a stable and secure relational environment, thus of both an 'adequate' amount of parental (de facto mother) care and of a good quality and stable service environment. Negative effects of early non-family childcare are more likely the younger the age. But the positive effects on cognitive development are highest when early education starts at around age two rather than later. The quality of non-family care is, of course, important, as well as daily duration of attendance. But hours of work and overall mothers' (and fathers') work experience are equally important, insofar as they affect the quality and quantity of time spent with the child. The intensity of all these different effects varies depending on family income and other characteristics, such as race and migrant background.

The limit of these studies is, first, that they have been mainly developed in the US. It is a strange paradox that countries with a much more developed and more homogeneous childcare service system do not have a comparable tradition of studies on the short- and long-term impact on children. Second, these studies at best compare children attending and not attending formal childcare services. But not only formal services differ. So also do family and informal care. A research design on the impact of different childcare arrangements should better differentiate not only between different kinds of formal services, but also between different kinds of family and informal arrangements.

In recent years, issues concerning the social integration of migrant children have introduced a new focus in many countries on early childcare and education services as 'good for children', insofar as they are believed to favour the development of linguistic and relational competences in the country of migration, 'protecting' children from isolation in/of ethnic groups. For instance, in Germany the debate around the new *Betreuungsgeld* (care allowance) that the centre-right government coalition wants to introduce for parents who prefer not to send their child to a formal service, also concerns the risk that this would encourage parents living on social assistance and particularly migrant (Turkish) parents not to send their children to a formal service, thus weakening their chances for social integration.

The positive role of early non-family care and education services in addressing both inequalities among children and, more generally, children's rights has been argued in recent years from two partly different perspectives – that of children as the human capital of the future, therefore as a common good to be invested in and cared for (e.g. Esping Andersen, 2002, 2009), and that of children as citizens in their own right and therefore entitled to developmental and material resources not only on the basis of their family membership (Lister, 2008; Therborn, 1996). These two approaches stress different dimensions of the social justice issue with regard to children: the former is more focused on the outcome of social inequality for the life chances of children when adults, the latter is more focused on the rights and needs of children *qua* children, therefore in their present life. These different focuses offer (particularly lower-class) parents somewhat distinct – and differently persuasive – rationales for accepting and even valuing early non-family care and education for their children. The human capital approach in fact stresses the risk that low-educated, low-income parents (mothers), particularly if with a migrant background, are de facto a liability for their children, not providing enough income (therefore mothers should work) and not enough cognitive stimuli. Early childcare and education services, therefore, are perceived as a form of compensation for a disadvantaged family

background. The children as citizens approach, by contrast, stresses societal responsibility to grant all children adequate family care and time, as well as non-family resources for the full development of their capabilities. Early non-family childcare and education is only one – very important – item of a complex package of ‘children’s endowment’, which also includes parents’ time to care, a more family-friendly workplace organization and so forth.

Conclusion

Whether governments and policies should sponsor ‘one best model’ of early childcare and mother and father behaviour is certainly a very controversial question. In a democratic society that values individual freedom as well as equal opportunities for all and children’s well-being, it is the range, quality of and access to options that counts. Different social groups refer to and elaborate alternative ‘normatives’. These are embedded in mothers’ and parents’ value systems, which in turn emerge in specific social and geographic contexts (Duncan and Irwin, 2004; Duncan et al., 2004; Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004). It is not just a question of the quantity of childcare, but also of its quality and nature; and judgements about quality and nature vary socially and geographically. As indicated above, for instance, findings from both the European Value Survey and the European Social Survey show that in countries where both mothers’ labour market participation (full- or part-time) and the availability of quality-controlled childcare are more widespread, the idea that children under school age are going to suffer if their mother works is less widespread than in countries where either mothers’ labour market participation or childcare supply, or both, are low.

From this perspective, the more constrained situation for parents, mothers and children is that where any form of support and acknowledgement of the costs involved in adequately caring for a child is scarce. But the opposite situation may be just as constraining – where the focus is on participation in paid work and less so on care as a valued and valuable activity and as requiring significant attention regarding quality, organization and timing.

In any case, the mere provision of childcare is not an adequate policy response to the problems of combining caring for children with employment. It is also necessary to deal with expectations as to what is proper care in different social groups, particularly for very young children. Combining leave and childcare services in a flexible way is a partial way to deal with this. Another is to differentiate the kinds of services that are supported and also to direct attention not only to coverage rates but also to quality. Still another is to allow and encourage less asymmetrical care-sharing between mothers and fathers. None of these solutions stands alone. Together, these approaches involve not only redistributive policies, but also policies related to time – over the life course and in the workplace.

They also involve what we might define as an effort to negotiate different cultural models and expectations, not in a top-down way, but through offering accessible incentives to reflect upon, and eventually review, shared understandings concerning children’s needs and rights, and family and particularly mothers’ responsibilities. Restricting the focus only to equal opportunities between men and women is not sufficient, and even less so the argument that it is necessary to increase women’s labour force participation rate for economic reasons. Both arguments underplay the children’s perspective. More

promising, both from the point of view of social justice and from that of responding to parents' concern for their children, is the argument which integrates the gender equal-opportunity discourse with that of children's rights and equal opportunities among children. But in order to develop and argue for policies that (while addressing the issue of social justice and of equal opportunities for both women and children across social classes) may find support in increasingly diversified societies, a research agenda must be developed that integrates the distinct dimensions involved when discussing who should care for very small children, how much and under what conditions.

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Notes

1. The concept of 'effective leave' was first developed by Plantenga et al. (2008). But the point of reference used by these authors was the minimum wage, which in my opinion is too low in many countries to offer a realistic measure of actual compensation. Here the point of reference is the average wage.
2. This statement lumps together all children aged 0 to school age and does not distinguish between working time schedules.

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