



Discussion Paper



| Beiträge zur **Summer School 2010**

Gender (in)equality: An incomplete revolution?

Cross EU similarities and differences
in the gender specific impact of parenthood

Chiara Saraceno

Harriet Taylor Mill-Institut für Ökonomie und Geschlechterforschung
Discussion Paper 13, 03/2011

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**Discussion Papers des Harriet Taylor Mill-Instituts für Ökonomie und
Geschlechterforschung der Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin**

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Friederike Maier und Antje Mertens**

Discussion Paper 13, 03/2011

ISSN 1865-9608

Download unter Publikationen: www.harriet-taylor-mill.de

This Discussion Paper documents a contribution to the

Summer School 16–23 July 2010

**at the Harriet Taylor Mill-Institute (HTMI) of the
Berlin School of Economics and Law:**

**Where is EU Gender Policy Going? Balance and Perspectives in
the Field of Employment and the Labor Market**

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- Development of employment and social policies in the EU,
- Employment and equal opportunities considering the Scandinavian Model,
- Employment and equal opportunities in the New Member States of Middle and Eastern Europe,
- The concept of discrimination in the legal norms of the EU and the extension of non-discrimination principles to other social features,
- Strategies and lobbying of gender equality political players,
- Gender dimensions of the present economic and financial crises. Speakers from European and national research contexts presented their recent work.

The summer school was funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)* and by the *Berliner Chancengleichheitsprogramm (BCP)*.

Organized by Dr. Ingrid Biermann and Prof. Dr. Friederike Maier.

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Gender (in)equality: An incomplete revolution?

**Cross EU similarities and differences
in the gender specific impact of parenthood**

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Abstract

In this paper, I will present an overview of debates and empirical data concerning what has been called the "unfinished" gender equality revolution from the perspective of the gender division of paid and unpaid work and of the role of social policies in either supporting or weakening this division. I will first discuss research and debates on the link between the gender division of unpaid family work and inequality in the labour market. Then, focusing exclusively on parenthood as a crucial factor in (re-)producing differences between men and women as well as among men and among women, I will discuss how different childcare and parenthood policy packages contribute to strengthening or, on the contrary, reducing the gendered impact of parenthood on labour market participation and also social class differences among women. Finally, I will discuss how the present economic crisis and the global competition through labour costs may affect further developments in this policy field.

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1 Introduction

In this paper, I will present an overview of debates and data concerning what has been called the “unfinished” (Gerson 2009) or “incomplete” (Esping Andersen 2009) gender equality revolution from the perspective of the gender division of paid and unpaid work and of the role of social policies in either supporting or weakening this division. I am well aware that gender equality is the result of the fairness of a society’s gender system from the perspective of social, political, economic, reproductive, mobility and personal integrity rights (O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999; Orloff 2009). It thus spans a wide range of sectors and dimensions and cannot be reduced to equality in the gender division of paid and unpaid labour (McDonald 2009; Orloff 2009). Moreover, even remaining within the limits of the gender division of labour in paid and unpaid work and the role of policies, I am aware that policies interact with other powerful institutional and cultural frameworks, particularly with the labour market, on the one hand, and with family and gender cultures, on the other (van der Lippe et al. 2010). The relationship between these three settings is neither one of pure causality nor one of pure autonomy. Women may enter and remain in the labour market in comparatively high numbers in the Scandinavian countries, with their generous and potentially gender-equalising policies, but also in Portugal, notwithstanding much less generous supporting policies and a more traditional gender culture, but relatively broad family support (Crompton and Lyonette 2007; Lewis, Campbell and Huerta 2008).

In the following, I will first discuss research and debates on the link between the gender division of unpaid family work and inequality in the labour market. Then, focusing exclusively on parenthood as a crucial source of evolving differences between men and women as well as among men and among women, I will discuss how different childcare and parenthood policy packages contribute to strengthening or, on the contrary, reducing this gender division and the gendered impact of parenthood on labour market participation.

2 The “incomplete revolution” and the gender division of paid and unpaid work

There is general agreement that the reason for the “incomplete revolution” lies mainly in the persistent asymmetry in the gender division of unpaid family work, which in turn leads to a lower investment by women in paid work. Implicitly, the focus is on labour market outcomes and on (in)equality in paid work. In this perspective, however, care and caring tend to be perceived mainly, if not only, as a

hindrance to better valued and valuable activities, rather than as valuable and valued activities in themselves, when assessed from the perspective of gender equity. The redistribution of care work between men and women and between families and the state is perceived almost exclusively as a means towards supporting women's labour market participation, rather than as a goal and a value in itself. In fact, in Esping Anderson's view, supporting mothers to work for pay instead of caring (full time) is not only a means to reduce poverty risks, but also a means to encourage early non-family childcare and education particularly for children from disadvantaged households. Implicitly this thesis suggests that family (mother's) care might not be a value but actually damaging for a child, not only in extremely emotionally deprived circumstances, but generally among lower-class, lower-educated households.

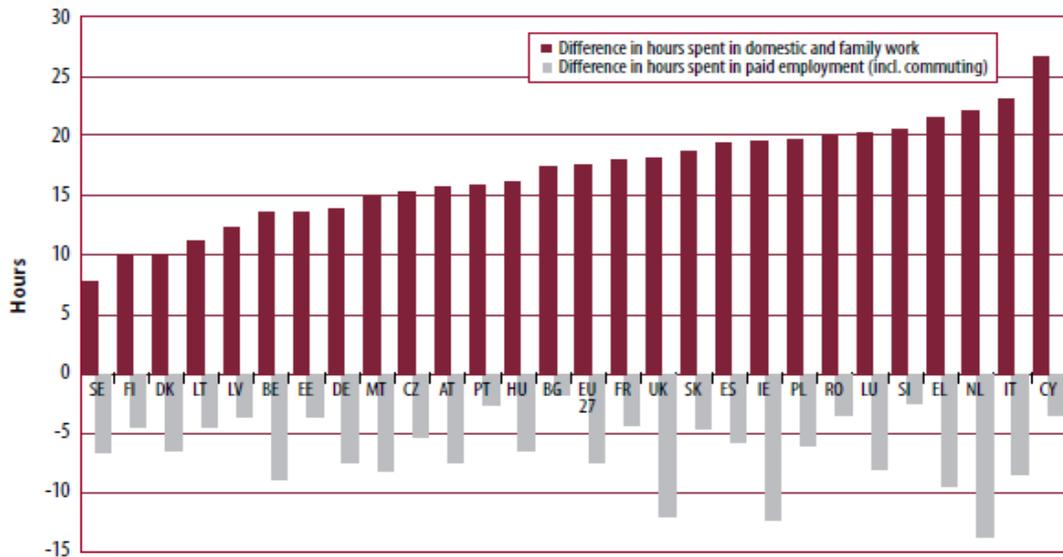
Some authors, however, underline that unpaid work is not just a constraint on paid work but also a valuable activity that deserves more social recognition (e.g., Knijn and Kremer 1997; Knijn and Ostner 2008). And still others (e.g., Fraser 1994) argue that the revolution is still incomplete because men are not (yet) what "most women are now": workers *and* carers.

In an attempt to combine the two perspectives, Gornick and Meyers (2009) argue that the dual-earner/dual-carer model resolves the tension between employment-focused and care-focused demands both with respect to gender equity and women's financial autonomy. In this perspective, policies should a) support women's labour-force participation by partly relieving them of family-linked care responsibilities; b) acknowledge the value of care work, both allowing time to care and compensating it financially; c) support and incentivise men to share care responsibilities.

The dual-earner/dual-carer model has obvious limitations. First of all, it is simply not necessarily everybody's preferred model (e.g., Lewis, Campbell and Huerta 2008; Orloff 2009). Second, it presupposes that there are good jobs for all, so that working is in fact worthwhile. Third, it is based on the assumption that the dual responsibilities of earning and caring are always shared by a couple. However, many individuals with earning and caring duties actually bear them alone, or at least not within a couple relationship. In a gender-equity perspective, therefore, policies should be evaluated not only on the basis of whether they encourage sharing within a couple, and to what degree, but also on whether they allow individuals, and particularly women, to set up their own households without being dependent on a partner (Hobson 1994) or being totally dependent on the state (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999). It should be noted, however, that Bäckman and Ferrarini (2010) have found that dual-earner policies indirectly also

support lone parents/mothers, protecting them and their children from poverty more efficiently than policies that support a traditional gender division of labour. Fourth, the conceptualisation of the dual-earner/dual-carer model focuses only on the care needs of (very young) children. But care needs (and the gender division of responsibilities around them) do not end in early childhood, rather they are a continuous and recurrent presence over the life course, and in ageing societies they may become particularly intense again in the second half of life when adults' own parents become frail. Finally, unpaid family work does not involve only care. It also involves household and administrative chores, as well as complex "front office" activities, whereby the family and its individual members are systematically connected both to the kinship network and to other agencies and institutions. Studies on time use, while indicating a persistent gender asymmetry in unpaid family work (Breen and Cook 2005; van der Lippe et al. 2010) – although with important cross-national differences – also show that men with a working partner tend to take on a greater share of unpaid family work than those with a partner who is a full-time homemaker. This may be the main reason for the increase in men's participation in unpaid family work over the years (Hook 2006), since it goes hand in hand with increases in women's labour-force participation and in dual-earner couples. Men, however, tend to "choose" within family work, privileging childcare (and administrative tasks) over household chores. And many of the latter chores are performed by women for men themselves. Van der Lippe et al. (2010) point out that childcare policies do have a limited effect on women's total time spent on housework, insofar as they affect mothers' labour-market participation and time in paid work. Nonetheless, they conclude that national- and class-specific "housekeeping cultures" (including not only standards, but also their gender specificity) may differ across countries and be more resilient in some countries than in others, as well as in different social groups. Figure 1 shows that differences between men and women and across countries are greater with regard to time spent in unpaid family work than to that spent in paid work.

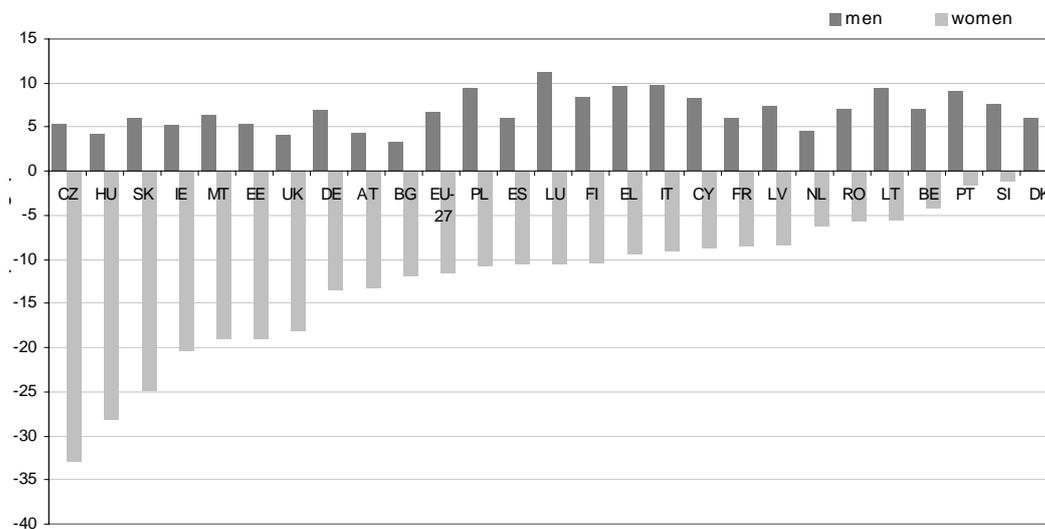
Fig. 1: Difference between working women's and men's average time spent in domestic and family work and in paid employment, in 2005 (by week)



Source: European Commission 2009.

These limitations of the dual-earner/dual-carer conceptualisation notwithstanding, focusing on gender (in)equality among men and women with young children remains a crucial step in the overall analysis of gender inequality and of cross-country variations in the degree to which the gender arrangements revolution is still incomplete. As has been observed, in fact, the remarkable cross-national variation in employment rates for women particularly concerns mothers. Mothers' employment rates remain considerably lower than childless women's employment rates, while fathers' employment rates are almost always higher than those of childless men, which exacerbates the gender gaps (OECD 2004; Pettit and Hook 2009). Employment is particularly low for mothers of young children (van der Lippe and van Dijk 2002; Pettit and Hook 2009). At the same time, patterns around employment during childbearing years differ remarkably across countries (Stier, Lewin-Epstein and Braun 2001). Consequently, as Figure 2, based on the European Labour Force Surveys, shows, the negative impact of motherhood and the deriving gender gap differ substantially across countries.

Fig. 2: Employment impact of parenthood for women and men (aged 25-49) in 2008. Difference in percentage points in employment rates with presence of a child under 12 and without the presence of any children

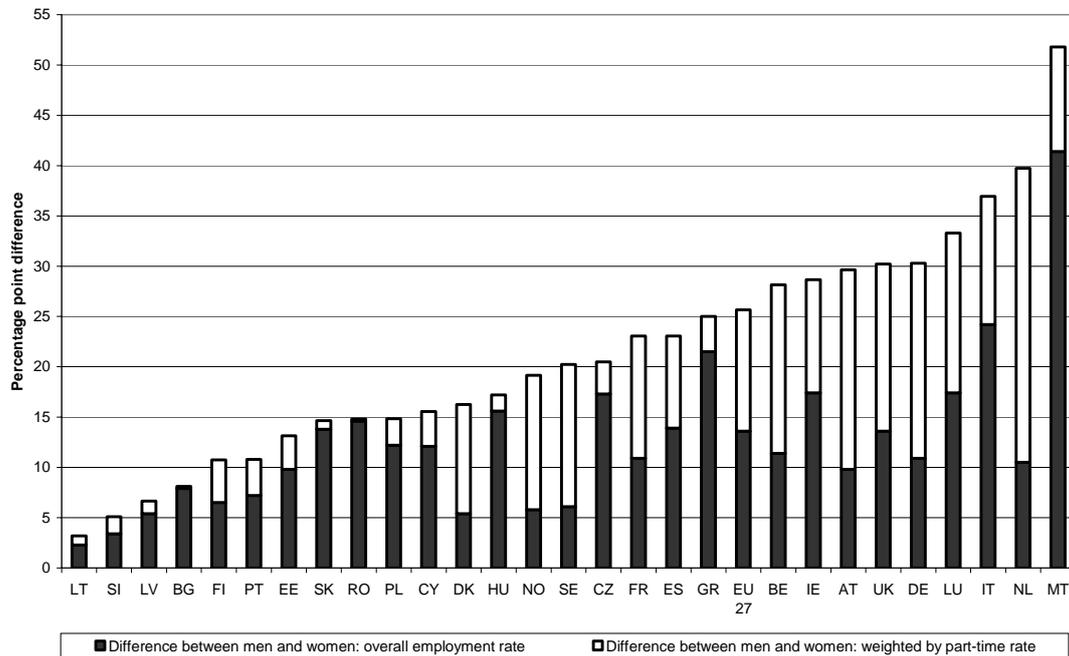


Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (LFS), annual average.

Notes: no data available for SE.

A further variation, which again primarily involves mothers, concerns the substantial differences between women’s overall employment rates and women’s full-time employment (Bardasi and Gornick 2008). Figure 3 shows these differences for the EU27 member countries. They are particularly striking for the Netherlands, which show a higher gender gap in employment than Italy, when measured in full-time equivalents. But they are noticeable also for Austria, Germany, Luxembourg, the UK and, within an overall lower gender gap, also in the Scandinavian countries. By contrast, there is little or no difference in the former socialist countries, where not only the great majority of women – with or without children – is in paid work, but these also work (long) full-time hours.

Fig. 3: Differences in employment rates between men and women (aged 25-49), absolute and weighted for part time, in 2007



Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Surveys, and European Commission 2009.

Taken together, these phenomena suggest that parenthood has become a crucial axis of difference between men and women, among women and among men, within and across countries. Childless men and women have much more comparable employment patterns, although this varies somewhat across countries, with Italy and Spain having a substantial, though declining, quota of childless women not in the labour force. By contrast, while fathers in all countries tend to work more than non-fathers, the reverse is true for mothers compared to non-mothers. Cross-country differences in the impact of parenthood, however, are greater for motherhood than for fatherhood. In most countries, the variation between mothers and childless women is larger than that between childless men and childless women. Furthermore, as Misra, Budig and Boeckman (2010) have shown based on LIS data, childless couples' employment hours are relatively similar across countries, while coupled mothers' and fathers' employment hours vary greatly cross nationally. This finding suggests that different policy contexts are particularly important for explaining cross-national variations in parents' employment patterns. In heterosexually coupled households, men's and women's employment hours are linked, but *how* they co-vary may differ based on the context.

Actual paid working time – of individuals and couples – is the result of various factors. Some of these are internal to the household characteristics, to income

and caring needs, and to the negotiating power of partners in couples. But working time is to a large degree determined by the country-specific working-time arrangements: length of the standard working day and week, whether part time is available and how it is regulated, and so forth. Within both the OECD and the EU, "standard" working time differs across countries for both women and men. In particular, while men are very likely to be working full time in every context, men's average weekly hours vary across countries, as do the total hours worked by households (Misra, Budig and Boeckman 2010). Mutari and Figart (2001, also see Jacobs and Gornick 2002 for a similar approach) develop a cross-national model of working-time regimes, which vary both in gender equity and flexibility. These include a male-breadwinner working-time regime, which is low both in flexibility and gender equity (e.g., Spain and Italy); a liberal flexibilisation working-time regime, which is high in flexibility but low in gender equity (e.g., Ireland and the UK); a solidaristic gender equity model, which is low in flexibility but high in gender equity (France and Denmark); and high-road flexibilisation, which is high both in flexibility and gender equity (no countries fit this regime). They also identify several countries as "transitional", including Sweden, the Netherlands and Western Germany. No former communist country, where working time is longer than in other EU countries, is included in this analysis, unfortunately. Finally, both the possibility to work and working time, in the presence of small children, are strongly influenced by childcare and parenthood policies. This dimension is addressed in the next section.

3 Childcare and parenthood policies in the EU27¹

Childcare policies are a composite package comprising different goals and measures. Countries differ in the relevance of the various goals, in the way these goals are defined as best achieved, and in the packaging of the various measures. Among the goals, we can indicate at least three: supporting the welfare and development of children, helping mothers to combine paid work and care, and supporting specific, more or less gendered, parenthood models and practices. The traditional public policy instruments to deal with these goals are maternity and parental leave, childcare services for preschool-age children, school hours and working-time schedules. The caring and supervision needs of children by no means end when they reach school age, although the school is rarely also considered from the perspective of work–family reconciliation (for an exception, see Gornick and Meyers 2004, who only consider a limited number of countries, however). However, many decisions concerning who should care, how much and

¹ This section is based on work done for the EU-funded MULTILINKS project and specifically on the policy data archive compiled for this project. See <http://www.multilinks-project.eu>.

in which combination with paid work, are taken around childbirth and in the very early years of a child's life, with medium- and long-term consequences for the degree to which parenthood and caring are and will be gendered and also for labour market participation and standing. Of course, values and social norms play an important role in the decision-making process. And results both of the European Value Survey and of the European Social Survey have indicated that there are important cross-country and social-group differences in perceptions of whether a mother of a preschool child should work (European Value Survey) and whether a mother of a child under three should work full time (European Social Survey) (Treas and Widmer 2000; Wall 2007; Morgan 2008). Differences concerning what fathers should do in the same circumstances are minimal, by contrast. Nonetheless, in both cases, the high percentage of those who do not have a firm opinion suggests that "what is best" is an open issue, to be decided not only on the basis of norms and principles, but also on that of the actual circumstances of work, parenthood and partnership, caring arrangements and so forth. In this perspective, policies, in so far as they provide specific options and institutionalise specific family and gender arrangements (Orloff 1993), play a crucial role in the decision-making process as to whether and how to combine paid work and care for a small child.

Notwithstanding the European directive on parental leave and the Barcelona targets concerning childcare services, extensive differences exist within the EU regarding the kind of childcare packages offered to parents of preschool children. These concern: the length and compensation of maternity leave; the length and compensation of parental leave; whether or not there is a father's quota; levels of coverage through services for children aged under three; levels of coverage for children aged three to six; opening hours; cost, etc. Summing up, therefore, the differences concern the balance between what has been called supported familialism (Saraceno 2010; Saraceno and Keck 2010; also see Leitner 2003), defamilialisation and familialism by default. In turn, these differences are a consequence of country-specific understandings concerning children's welfare and the state's and families' responsibilities with respect to it, and also concerning gender roles and the importance of gender equality. For this reason, it is important to analyse cross-country variation in the overall childcare package and not to focus on single measures taken in isolation. Figure 4 offers a synthetic overview of the level of coverage and of the composition of the publicly supported childcare packages for preschool children offered to working parents by the various EU countries through the combination of maternity and parental leaves (weighted on the basis of their level of compensation) and the level of coverage by childcare services. It immediately becomes apparent that countries differ not only with regard to the degree to which there is a public responsibility – via sup-

ported familialism (adequately paid leaves) and/or via defamilialisation (service coverage) – and, conversely, with regard to the degree to which the family is left to its own resources; they also differ regarding the way in which public support is provided, particularly during the first three years of a child's life. Some countries, particularly the former communist states (with the exception of Poland), grant long, well-compensated parental leaves (up to two years in Lithuania, for example). Others, like Belgium, combine short, well-paid leaves with a high level of service coverage. Still others, particularly the Nordic countries (with internal differences), offer a balanced combination of leave up to one year followed by almost universal coverage through services. In Finland and Norway, there is also the additional, and highly debated, option to receive a child-raising allowance after the parental leave has expired instead of using public childcare. This possibility is also present in France, but it is linked to the number and birth order of children and it is means tested. Finally, it should be noted that in some countries there are special provisions for parents' working-time schedules during the early years of a child's life (usually up to the third). In Germany and Sweden, for instance, after returning from maternity or parental leave, parents are entitled by law to transform their full-time contract into a part-time one, and then revert again to full-time work at a later date. In Italy, during a child's first year of life, a parent is entitled to two (fully paid) hours off a day in order to feed the baby. There are, however, not sufficiently complete and reliable data to allow for a systematic overview of these additional measures.

Out of fairness for the reader, it should be noted that our method of calculating "effective leave" – weighting duration against compensation (for a similar approach, also see Plantenga and Remery 2005; UNICEF 2008) – may result in assimilating comparatively short but well-paid leaves with comparatively long but low-paid or unpaid leaves, or also with mixed systems where a well-paid period is followed by an unpaid one. The latter, for instance, is the case in Germany, where, since the 2007 reform, following the fully compensated maternity leave, parental leave is compensated at 67% of pay for the first year, followed by an additional two years where compensation is very low and targeted only at low-income parents. These differences contribute to further articulating the range of options and their more or less gendered and class-specific outcomes. The literature, in fact, considers parental leaves to be decisive but ambivalent for mothers' labour market participation (Bird 2003; Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow 2009). Long leaves are identified as disincentivising mothers from fully reintegrating into the labour market as well as constraining their ability keep pace with changing job conditions (see, e.g., Lapuerta, Baizán and González 2010 for the Spanish case). They may therefore crystallise the gender division of labour and responsibilities towards children (Lewis 2009). The same may happen in the opposite

situation, when leaves are perceived as too short, particularly in the face of inflexible working hours. Leave characteristics may also have a divergent impact on women holding different positions in the labour market. Some studies have shown that (too) short leaves have a restraining impact on fertility among the better educated, while they increase the likelihood that low-educated women with low-paid jobs will not return to the labour market (Waldfogel, Higuchi and Abe 1999; Esping-Andersen 2009). A partly opposite effect may occur in the case of long, but unpaid or low-paid leaves. Mothers in a well-off household may be able to afford to take leave, while mothers in less affluent households may not (Lapuerta, Baizán and González 2010).² The level of payment of parental leave, together with whether there is a reserved quota for fathers or not, is a crucial feature also with regard to the willingness of fathers to take part of the leave, thus partly defeminising parental care. On the basis of an overview of existing evidence, a UNICEF (2008) study argues that in order to have a substantial percentage of fathers take at least part of the leave, two conditions are necessary: there must be a “take it or leave it” reserved father’s quota and the leave must be compensated at least at 60% of lost pay (also see O’Brien 2009; Ray, Gornick and Schmitt 2010). Figure 5 shows a) how much of the total parental leave is specifically reserved for fathers under the condition “take it or leave it”; and b) how much of the total leave fathers might theoretically take (in addition to the reserved quota, or without the reserved quota) is compensated at 60% or more of individual monthly earnings. Among the countries with the longest and well-compensated leaves, only in Germany and Sweden is there a reserved quota for fathers. No former socialist country has one. Luxembourg, followed by Greece, has the longest well-compensated father’s quota.

It should be noted that even where the majority of fathers takes a portion of the leave, on average they are far from sharing it equally (UNICEF 2008). However, taking at least a portion of parental leave seems to have a long-term impact on men’s behaviour and on the parental balance of responsibilities towards children. According to Sullivan et al. (2009), for instance, who compare Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom, incentives to take a (comparatively long) leave seem to have a long-term impact on caring behaviour.

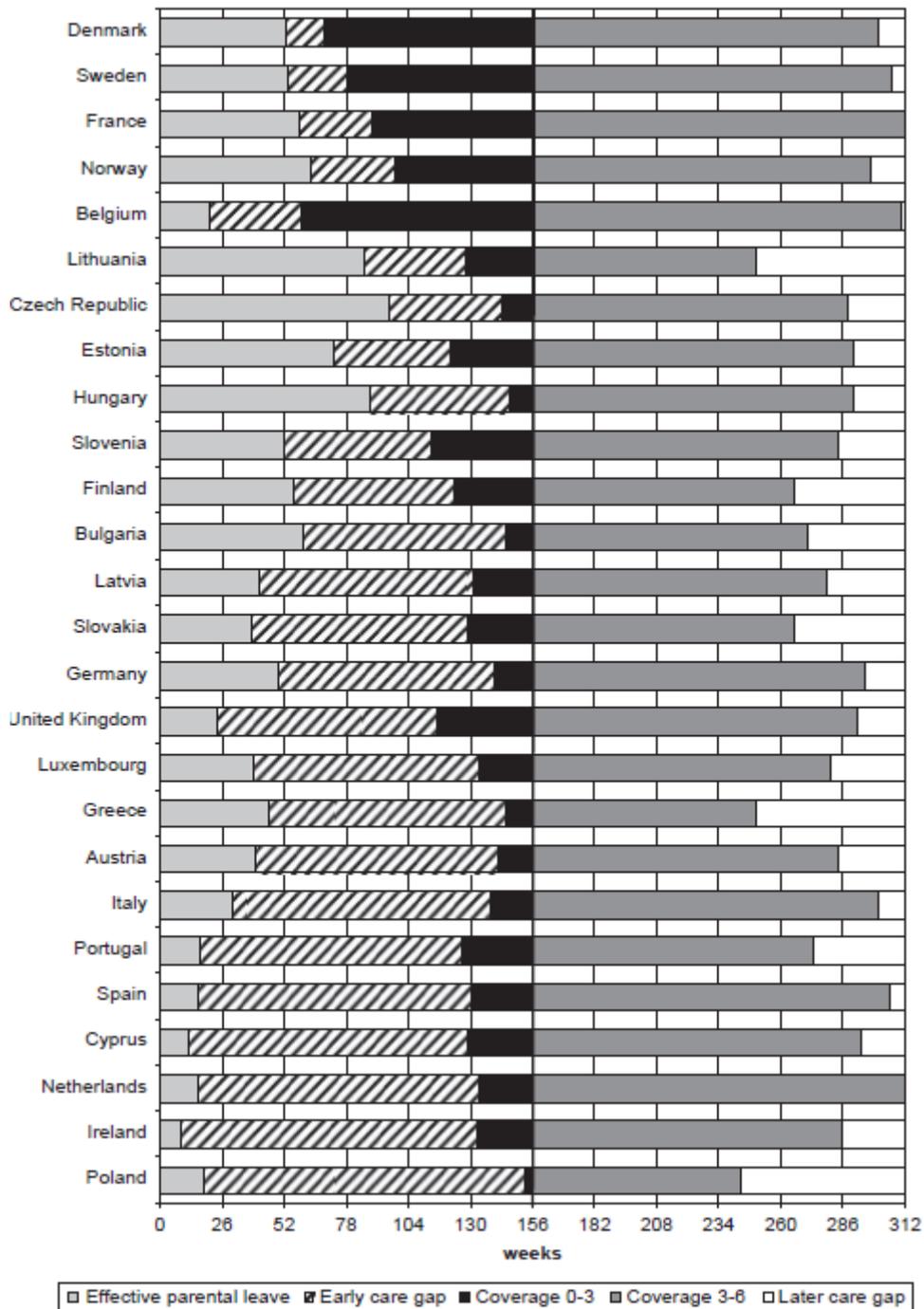
With regard to childcare services, differences in coverage – measured by the number of weeks each child in the respective age bracket might attend a (publicly supported) childcare facility based on the available places (see Saraceno and Keck 2010) – are greater for the younger age bracket, even taking account of differences in the duration of effective leaves. Unfortunately, the available data

² Mention should be made of the fact that many working parents are not entitled to parental leave at all because of their contractual conditions.

do not distinguish between part-time and full-time services for the two age brackets. This is a crucial feature, of course, from the point of view of the organisation of parental time. Data from the EU SILC Survey, which refer to individual behaviour and not to institutional frameworks, indicate that part-time use of leave for children aged under three is widespread particularly in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, and to a lesser degree in Austria, Germany (particularly the Western regions), Cyprus, Spain and Ireland. With the exception of Spain and Cyprus, all of these countries have a high rate of part-time employment among mothers.

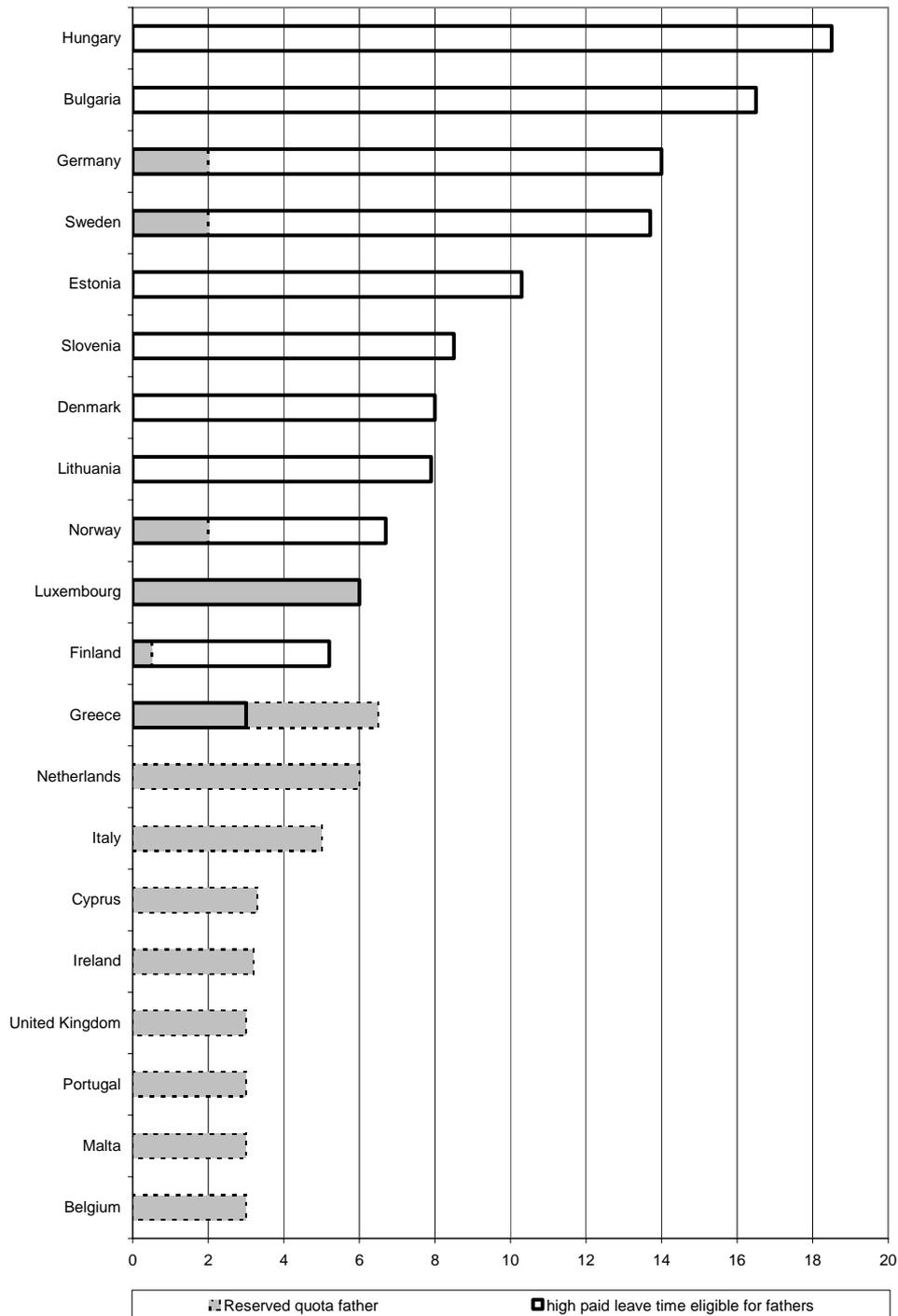
Looking at Figure 4 and Figure 5 together, only in the case of Norway, Sweden and, to a lesser extent, Denmark and Finland, does the overall childcare package offered by policies seem to support a combination of a high degree of partly defeminised supported familialism with a high level of defamilialisation. In all the other countries, either incentives to defeminise parental care or effectively supported familialism or defamilialisation (or all three) are lacking, thus reducing the resources for an overall rebalancing of the gender division of caring responsibilities.

Fig. 4: Distribution of caring responsibilities for children aged up to six (2004–2007).



Sources: Multilinks Database; see Saraceno and Keck 2010. Malta and Romania are not included because of a lack of data on childcare for the under-threes. Malta has a short, and Romania a medium effective parental leave, and both have low childcare coverage for children aged over three.

Fig. 5: Reserved quota for fathers and total length of leave open to fathers and paid at 60% of earnings or more, in months (2009)



Note: Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain are not included since they neither offer a period of well-paid leave nor reserve a quota for fathers.

Source: Multilinks Database.

Looking beyond preschool age, differences may be found, often also at the intra-country level, in school hours, the distribution of vacation and school time, whether children can have a meal in school and under what conditions, and so

forth. Unfortunately, data on these aspects are even less available and sound than those concerning childcare services for preschool children.

Overall, policies contribute to a defeminisation of care more through (decommodified, i.e., publicly supported) defamilialisation via services than through forms of supported familialism that incentivise a rebalancing of the gender division of labour among parents. Substantive incentives for fathers to take part of the parental leave are present only in a few countries and their efficacy seems to be limited, although not irrelevant. Data on the use of time (see Gershuny and Sullivan 2003; Aliaga 2006) suggest that also in countries – such as Norway and Sweden – where such measures have been in place since the 1970s (Leira 2006), fathers do share more childcaring activities but, unlike mothers, without reducing their paid working time in the medium or long term. Thus, greater gender equity both in the household and in the labour market seems to occur because a “third party” (the state) steps in, shouldering not only part of the costs of care (as in paid leaves) but also of the responsibility/time to provide it. This may also occur through the market, of course, as in the United States (e.g., Morgan 2005). But in this case, issues both of quality and of social inequality arise, since not all parents have the financial and knowledge resources to be able to command good-quality care (e.g., Crompton and Lyonette 2007).

4 Cross-country differences in the depth of work-family conflicts

The work–family reconciliation module of the second wave of the European Social Survey allows us to explore the manner in which processes and factors associated with work–family conflict in the presence of young children vary across gender and across countries, although the survey does not include all EU countries. Using these data, Gash (2009) and Polavieja (2009) find that there is a wage and career penalty in all countries for women with children who devote time to unpaid family work, but with important differences. In particular, Gash finds strong institutional effects, in so far as in countries that are unsupportive of working motherhood, working mothers are more likely to occupy disadvantageous labour market positions relative to non-mothers and also incur a higher wage penalty. Among the countries she considers, the United Kingdom and Western Germany provide the least support for working mothers, as well as the largest penalties for motherhood. Similarly, Polavieja finds that the association between housework and earnings is much weaker in societies with higher levels of decommodification (state/social policy allows independence from the market) and defamilialisation (state/social policy allows independence from the family). The countries belonging to the Scandinavian cluster represent the “good practice” example. Surprisingly, however, the wage penalty is comparatively low (although to a lesser degree) also in the former socialist countries, where the level

of women's labour-force participation is as high as in the Scandinavian countries, but the degree of both decommodification and defamilialisation is lower. Other mechanisms are possibly at play that would need further exploration.

Gender differences in the factors associated with the work-life conflict are the focus of an analysis by Steiber (2009). Using a sample of dual-earner couples in all 23 countries in the ESS survey, she finds that work demands such as long, unsocial and unpredictable working hours, as well as work pressure, increase the work-life conflict for both men and women. However, caring responsibilities increase time-based conflict for women only, while job insecurity increases strain-based conflict for men only. These gender differences seem to be the outcome both of the gender division of responsibilities in the family and of country-specific contexts. Cultural attitudes also seem to play a small role.

Long working hours increase the possibility of a work-family conflict. But too few or unpaid working hours seem to have a negative effect on women's well-being. Boye (2009), in fact, finds that while men's well-being appears to be unaffected by hours of paid work and housework, women's well-being increases with paid working hours and decreases with increased housework hours. In another article (2009b), however, she shows that work-family conflict and perceived well-being are two distinct dimensions, with length of working hours playing a different role in each of them, in addition to being mediated by the institutional framework. The associations between well-being and hours of paid work and housework vary, in fact, by family policy model, although not always in expected ways. Paid working hours seem to be less beneficial to women's well-being in the market-oriented than in the traditional family policy model, whether or not work-family conflict is taken into account. Housework hours appear to be more beneficial to women's well-being in the traditional family policy model than in other models, but only if the hours of housework are below a given threshold. Boye correctly points out that family policy models may select different kinds of women in paid work or in homemaking. Thus, cross-country differences might hide intra-women differences. This is an issue that deserves further exploration.

Gallie and Russell (2009) find that different patterns of labour market regulation, but also of gender and policy arrangements, across countries result in interesting cross-country differences in men's and women's vulnerability to stress and conflict. Male employees in the Northern countries seem the best protected from work-family conflict, due to their comparatively short working hours. Scandinavian female employees, on the contrary, are the most vulnerable to conflict among women workers in the seven Western European countries included in the

analysis. They tend, in fact, to remain in full-time work also when they have children. Although they are supported by services while in paid work, they cannot avoid experiencing time pressures in dealing with the double burden of work and caring responsibilities. In Britain and the Netherlands, family pressures are reduced by the fact that many mothers work part time. The one-and-a-half breadwinner/one-carer model (i.e., the neo-traditionalist or modernised model) seems to offer the most harmonious solution from the point of view of individual well-being, at the cost of reduced financial autonomy for women/mothers and of their vulnerability to partnership break-up. Of course, if other countries, particularly the Eastern European ones, had been included in the sample, the picture would look somewhat different, in so far as situations with high women's employment, long working hours and medium to low service support would have been present. Gallie and Russell (2009) and McGinnity and Calvert (2009) also find that the marked rise in levels of work pressure in European countries since the early 1990s has contributed substantially to greater strain in managing work and family life, particularly among the high skilled. In turn, given the persistent gender images and the limitation to the degree to which care may be outsourced to non family services, this might slow down, or stop, the trend towards a greater gender equity in the household, as found, for instance, by Crompton, Brockmann and Lyonette (2005) and by Cha (2010). It might also increase differences between childless women and mothers.

5 Conclusion

In view of these findings, and of the old and new tensions they highlight, it is difficult to delineate a "best practice" policy package from a gender equity perspective. On the one hand, the Norwegian and Swedish combination of fairly long and well-paid parental leaves, with a reserved quota for fathers and a fairly universal childcare coverage, would seem to go a long way towards responding both to the need to have time to care and to that of achieving individual financial autonomy for both men and women – with a fair degree of gender equality in the labour market (but see, for instance, Lister 2009, for some misgivings on the latter), although with persistent asymmetries in the distribution of time in paid and family work. However, it is highly improbable that the countries with short or low-paid leaves will increase either the length or the compensation, or both, in the next few years, given the economic crisis, the increase in unemployment and the intra-EU and global cross-country competition for low-cost labour. Furthermore, the increase in labour market flexibility, fixed-term and semi-autonomous contracts, depending on the national context and legal framework, may weaken, *de jure* or *de facto*, entitlement to parental leave. One might wonder whether the recourse, particularly in the former socialist countries, to long parental leaves

(taken almost exclusively by women) as an instrument to reduce official unemployment rates will continue to be financially viable and culturally/politically legitimate.

The development of childcare services (defamilialisation) seems to offer more promise for becoming a generalised trend, although the difficulty in reaching the so-called Barcelona targets suggests that here, too, there are economic, but probably also cultural difficulties. Furthermore, in this policy area there may be contrasting goals which, by supporting different solutions, may strengthen or, on the contrary, weaken the legitimisation of childcare services as such, particularly for the under three years old. As Mahon (2006), among others, has argued, in fact, there are two competing agendas with regard to childcare services: one, particularly evident in the EU approach, but also in part of the OECD approach, which advocates childcare services as part of the work–family conciliation strategy and of the strategy to increase women’s labour-market participation; the other, supported by the OECD, which advocates early childcare and education as part of the child investment strategy. Of course, in principle, the two goals are not in contradiction. But they may become so when, in the name of supporting women’s labour force participation and of cost containment, the focus is on quantity and less on quality (e.g., on the training and professional requirements of carers, on spatial and environmental standards, and so forth). This may also increase parents’ (mothers’) misgivings concerning their children’s welfare and the trade-off between working and caring, particularly if their financial means do not allow them to “shop” for what they would perceive as adequate care (also see Saraceno forthcoming). In this perspective, the decision by the EU Social Protection Committee to use data on attendance at any kind of childcare service – public or private and at whatever cost – as an indicator of progress towards the Barcelona targets is, in my view, highly debatable for at least two reasons. First, attendance and coverage are linked but are not the same thing, particularly if the former is taken from survey data (EU SILC) not intended to study this particular phenomenon. Second, since the Barcelona targets represent a pledge by each member country to offer a minimum coverage (33% in the case of children aged under three), it is the coverage offered through public effort (either directly providing the services or financially supporting them or their users) that should be assessed, not the coverage provided through the market. For instance, in Italy, in the past ten years almost all increase in coverage is due to market initiative. But market services are not only more costly (and therefore exclude low-income parents); they are also of widely varying quality and may not be subject to any pedagogical or professional control.

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