



Towards a dual-earner / triple- carer model of the family for renewed solidarities.

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Over the last two decades, the European Commission has developed an arsenal of measures to tackle the employment gap between men and women. The going term in the gender equality agenda has become 'equal economic independence' between men and women, focusing on the need to reduce dependency on the partner (male breadwinner) but also reliance on the state to acquire social protection.

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Research on welfare states and work-life balance policies have long addressed, since the pioneering work of feminist scholars in the early 1990s, gender implications of different welfare regimes and policies, with much discussion about the criteria to include and the dimensions to articulate (Meulders and O’Dorchai, 2007). Broadly speaking most typologies analyse policies with respect to their actual or potential impact on earner-carer models of the family (or adult worker models), according to the degree of reliance on parental care, private care (market or informal) or state-supported care and the way caring tasks were shared between men and women (Korpi, Ferrarini and Englund, 2013).

Public provision of childcare (including publicly subsidised direct provision of not-for-profit services) and short-term maternity leaves and paternity leaves that are job protected and well paid are well recognised as favouring gender equality and promoting women’s employment, while the latter helps promote fathers’ involvement in caring activities, as long as the period is substantially similar to that provided to mothers (De Henau, Meulders and O’Dorchai, 2007; Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011). These measures can coexist easily with childcare following up after a short period (less than a year) of equally shared parental care. They are seen to promote a dual earner/ dual carer model (or adult worker model). Iceland has been the closest example of this equalising combination. In practice though, the ideal model should be labelled ‘dual earner / triple carer’, with significant state intervention to allow both partners to remain in employment and to engage in caring tasks in equal terms but also to provide the child with professional education and socialisation opportunities.

A more controversial scheme is to do with longer periods of low paid and transferable leaves. The issue lies in those leaves being paid at a low flat rate, thereby more attractive to lower paid workers, usually women. These schemes are likely to reinforce traditional gender roles as they do not provide any incentive for paternal take-up and by being badly paid and long anyway, do not help sustain economic independence and long-term career prospects. Many countries have adopted such schemes usually because they are cheaper than childcare services (and quicker to implement) and also because they are in line with attitudes confining the mother as the primary home carer or with views that promote parental choice and limited state interference in private lives. Home care allowances of various forms, insofar as they are available to either working or non-working mothers also belong to that category of strongly gender biased measures.

Less obvious are those interventions that become a stay-at-home mother subsidy indirectly such as marital tax allowances, family means-tested benefits and tax credits, and other non individualised financial benefits. By targeting household income rather than individual income (including child’s income), they all act as second earner disincentives, usually negatively affecting women’s extensive (or intensive) margin more than men’s. They pertain to that category of policies that promote parental choice at the household level, which in practice results in individuals being constrained in their traditional gender roles (De Henau and Himmelweit, 2013).

Finally, flexible working arrangements such as availability of part-time work, flexible work requests (variation of within-job days, shifts etc.) can also trigger gender biases if they are primarily targeted at women and not at men. Even if some arrangements may protect social rights and offer career prospects, part-time employment still procures lower earnings. Since women make up most of the part-time jobs, these do not contribute to rebalancing economic independence between men and women. A 'full-time-man-half-time-woman couple' is still much more common than a 'three-quarter-time-each' couple. Employers' attitudes also need to change to offer genuine perspectives of flexible work for men. More effective than part-time employment are policies that offer a reduction of full-time hours by affecting both men and women at the same time and could therefore make full-time jobs more attractive to women and free caring time for men (De Henau and Himmelweit, 2013).

Increasing income inequalities between households as a result of the crisis have been widely documented whereas the impacts of the crisis and austerity policies on within-household inequalities are still left largely unexplored (for both methodological and up-to-date data reasons). Using most recent data from Eurostat shows that gender employment gaps (in full-time equivalent terms) have narrowed between 2003 and 2012 in most countries, and mainly during the crisis years with men's employment falling faster than women's (Eurostat, 2013). However in Germany, Austria, Sweden, Finland and the Czech Republic, countries relatively untouched by the crisis (in terms of employment) the gap has remained stable (under 1 percentage point change). In Poland, Romania and Slovakia, the FTE gap has actually increased (mainly due to pre-crisis trends). In Southern Europe, where employment has fallen sharply, mainly for men, the FTE gaps have closed by more than ten percentage points (although the trend started before the crisis) but austerity policies and cuts in public services and employment may well affect women more in the future (European Commission, 2013).

While the ingredients of successful policies to achieve gender equality have remained the same as above, the current crisis has posed new threats to such policies, mainly because of their perceived costly implementation. However, one could imagine a complete change of attitudes towards redistribution of resources, employment, caring time and earnings without affecting government budgets negatively. Redistributing full-time hours and making men work less and women work more, while reducing working time for all could help foster caring activities by both parents, while investing in childcare services to allow both parents to work full-time, can be funded by redistributed earnings through tax. Given that childcare private costs (and lack of availability) are a tax on mothers' earnings (potential or actual), taxing employment more (progressively) would just operate as redistribution between men's and women's earnings.

Even debt could be sought of as a source of funding. Arguing that a country cannot afford to borrow more because it would be unfair to the next generations who were not responsible for the crisis is somewhat contrary to the idea of equity by claiming that public investment in social infrastructure that will precisely benefit the next generations (in education, care, etc.) should not be paid by those beneficiaries. It seems the crisis has accelerated the replacement of the logic of solidarity by that of fairness and choice whereby equal economic independence becomes synonym with individualisation of risks and individual workfare rather than mutualisation of risk and provision of public goods. Yet choice conceived at the household level suffers major caveats that usually go against greater transformation of gender roles because of the wrong assumption (by ideology or by default) that couples have congruent interests and that what they decide ultimately is not a matter for the state

(De Henau and Himmelweit, 2013). Therefore the solutions outlined in this contribution require a shift of paradigm, away from individual liberties and false choices and towards renewed solidarities, between individuals in the household and the society at large, present and future.

Somehow, the beauty of achieving such ideal of gender equality is that it goes beyond a noble objective of justice. It is a tool to achieve long-term economic and social aims that shift the focus from growth to progress, from earning to caring, from profitability to sustainability, from racing to sharing, from independence to interdependence. Easier said than done but the saying is part of the doing, in a world where some voices are more powerful than others.

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