Chapter 3

Employment Policy, Women’s Labour Market Activation and Demographic Trends

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Demographers’ warnings of decreasing birth rates and an ageing population have finally entered the consciousness of European policy makers and political leaders. As a result, in recent years demographic trends and social indicators have become a hot topic of discussion. The interest in the current demographic transition, however, has to be understood within the context of welfare retrenchment and the impact of globalization on the long term future of the European Social Model. Predictions for the second half of the 21st century are not optimistic and if the current decline in birth rates persists, Europe will face a labour shortage as early as 2030. This trend will ultimately have repercussions for economic growth and the ability of the EU to compete in the global market. It is thus becoming increasingly clear that in order to tackle these challenges, EU Member States need to adopt a multidimensional approach to employment policy which takes into consideration current changes to family structures and social dynamics.

Given this background, the context of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, it is located within current debates about the population time-bomb in Europe. Secondly, it looks at recent policies aimed at increasing women’s participation in the official labour market (i.e. activation policies). It seeks to bring together these two discourses by looking at the issue of work-life balance, as women’s engagement with the labour market is dependent upon their ability to reconcile the demands of paid employment with those of care duties. Analysis of the European Employment Strategy (EES) seems pertinent within this framework, particularly given the target of 60 per cent female employment by 2010 and the call for improved childcare services.

The central question that underpins the analysis presented here is as follows: can the EES provide the right framework for the development of a multidimensional approach to gender equality that will encourage higher female participation in the official labour market, whilst challenging traditional power structures in the family? In order to answer this question the chapter will explore three interrelated issues: (1) Can employment policies be used to tackle gender power hierarchies in the family? (2) Do gender inequalities influence women’s choices about mothering/motherhood? (3) Is there a link between the consolidation of the adult worker model and declining fertility rates?
Looking at current employment trends within the wider context of the demographic transition in Europe, it is important to ask whether this shift in the policy agenda is the result of increasing awareness about the gendered nature of women’s choices or a reaction to the economic challenges facing the Single Market. By looking at the equal opportunities objectives entrenched within the EES, this chapter will unpack the values that define employment and family policies in Europe. In so doing, it asks whether policy-makers are seeking to advance women’s rights/interests or are simply seeking to safeguard the interests of the state/market.

The chapter begins by looking at the impact of demographic trends (specifically, decreasing birth rates and ageing population) on policymaking choices in the area of equal opportunities and employment. It will then evaluate the current discourses in favour of family friendly policies and/or reconciliation between work and family life, focussing in particular on the displacement of the male breadwinner model by an ‘adult worker model’. Looking at the overarching aims of reconciliation policies from a gender perspective, it will examine the biases and norms entrenched within this policy area. The chapter will discuss how this shift in focus came about and the impact it might have on social, economic and political structures in Europe. Next, the chapter will turn to look at women’s employment, examining the link between the introduction of work-life balance as a policy principle and the current drive to expand women’s participation in the official labour market at a time when declining birth-rates are threatening the long-term viability of the European Social Model. Two further sections then consider the relationship between demographic trends and policy, and the possible role for EES in addressing these issues. Finally, some conclusions are offered about the potential of EES to address demographic issues on the one hand, and gender equality issues on the other.

**Demographic Trends in Europe – An Overview**

It is a well documented fact that European population trends in the 20th century have been defined by low birth and death rates. In other words, Europeans are living longer and are having fewer children (Hilgeman and Butts 2004). The decline in birth rates over the last century is common to most developed countries, but the sharp down turn that has taken place in Europe since the end of the Second World War has been paralleled only in Japan. Although there is a degree of variation in birth and fertility rates amongst Member States of the EU, in 2003 the average for the EU as a whole was 1.47 children per woman. This figure includes a high of 1.88 children per woman in France and Ireland, and a low of 1.17 children per woman in the Czech Republic (European Commission 2004: 14). The decline in fertility rates has also been accompanied by an increase in life expectancy. The cumulative effect of these two trends is the EU’s ageing population. Recent forecasts predict that by 2030 the population of over 65s will account, on average, for 22 per cent of the total population (European Commission 2004: 14, 38). Enlargement of the EU is also due to have a negative impact on current population trends within the EU. Although in the first instance it will help to reduce the median age, population
decline in Central and Eastern Europe is also becoming cause for concern (European Commission 2004: 11).

This demographic transition, however, has not occurred in a vacuum. Rather, it has taken place within the context of changing social relations and economic structures. Particularly notable are the changes in family structures, such as the marked increase in births outside marriage, cohabitation and lone-parenting as well as the significant growth in women’s employment rates (Babb et al. 2006; Eurostat 2005; European Commission 2004; Lewis 2001; Craig 2007). What these statistics point to is substantial changes in socio-political and economic relations in Europe, to the point that it has been argued that changes in women’s expectations and educational achievement are starting to have a significant impact on the demographic make up of Europe (Eurostat 2006; Crompton 2001). As Lewis (2001: 156) explains, “it is now widely accepted that women will engage in paid work, and attitudinal surveys have shown consistent increases in acceptance by men and women of female employment at all stages of the life course”. More specifically, there appears to be a reality-expectation gap, whereby social attitudes/norms about traditional gender roles/functions are coming into conflict with women’s expectations, household economic needs for a dual income and the more general need of the European economy to increase the percentage of its working population. This gap and the inequitable distributions of labour within the household or family ultimately contribute to women’s choice to have fewer children than they would deem to be ideal (Craig 2007).

Employment policies can help (albeit only in part) to address some of these dilemmas by easing current pressures on families and helping women to remain active within the official labour market during the childbearing years. The replacement of the male breadwinner model with the adult worker model in European welfare states highlights the complexity of current socio-economic interactions. Yet, it would be naïve to assume that this new model is either gender neutral and/or implicitly advances a more equitable distribution of care work within the family unit.

From the Male Breadwinner Model to the Adult Worker Model – Some Theoretical Considerations

The most important body of literature seeking to deal with the complexities that define the relationship between care work and employment come from the field of social policy. More specifically, the vast body of research looking at breadwinner models seeks to unpack the impact of gender power hierarchies and divisions of labour on welfare regimes. This section provides an overview of current debates dealing with the transition from male breadwinner model to adult worker model that is currently under way in Europe.

In the 1990s a wide body of work was published looking at the gender dimension of welfare regimes theories. Leading the way was Jane Lewis’s (1992) pioneering work on the male breadwinner model, though many other scholars contributed to this literature by expanding the field of analysis to lone-parent families (Duncan 1995; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Daly 1994) and the diversity in gender divisions present
in Europe (Sainsbury 1994). More recently, changes in the social policy agenda towards flexible employment structures forced a reconsideration of how gender is incorporated within policy and academic discourse. It is in this context that a shift occurred from discussions about the male breadwinner model to something that is in appearance more gender neutral, but which in fact fits within wider economic and power hierarchies. As Lewis (2006: 33) explains, “the [male breadwinner model] assumed full male employment and stable families’, however economic changes driven by greater female participation in the employment market can potentially pose a challenge to the social fabric that underpins this model”.

Lewis’s assessment of gender hierarchies in the 1990s drew attention to the complex set of structures that have defined the social policy agenda of European states since the end of the Second World War. Her thesis developed as a critique of Esping-Andersen’s (1990) welfare regime model, which she argued was gender-blind in as far as it failed to take into consideration the implicitly decommodified nature of women’s work in the domestic sphere (Lewis 1992). She provides an alternative framework for the categorization of welfare states, based predominantly on gender relations and hierarchies in the family. She argued that “modern welfare regimes have all subscribed to some degree to the idea of a male-breadwinner model”, though there has been substantial variation in the way in which such structures have been played out in practice (Lewis 1992: 162).

The basic premise of the male breadwinner model is a division of labour whereby men are the primary or sole breadwinners, and women are the primary carers. This division of labour reflects the assumption that the public and private spheres are distinct and independent. Lewis’s work in the last fifteen years has sought to challenge this distinction. In the first instance, she has shown how social policies serve to constrain individual choices. Secondly, her assessment of welfare regimes help to stimulate debate on the power dynamics that support the social policy agenda, in as far as the male breadwinner model was based on three key factors: (1) women’s economic dependence; (2) full male employment; and (3) the traditional family (Lewis 1992; Lewis 2003). Haas (2005: 495) develops this analysis further by spelling out something that is implicit in much of Lewis’s work: gender divisions of labour that underpin the male breadwinner model are based on a narrow understanding of mothering which is tantamount to nurturing and caring.

Although the core assumptions at the heart of the male breadwinner model provide a starting point of analysis, it is important not to underestimate the wide variety of approaches in which these principles were put into effect. At one end of the spectrum we can find the Nordic states that have sought to encourage female participation in the official labour market, whereas Southern European states have sought to secure the long term viability of the familial welfare model. Moreover, as Lewis (2001: 153) points out,

A pure male breadwinner model never existed; women always engaged in the labour market. [However] there has been an enormous behavioural change in the second half of the twentieth century, with increasing numbers of women entering the labour market. Indeed, this has become one point of convergence among EU Member States.
What a number of studies carried out in the last ten years have shown is that changes in social and economic dynamics that have led to increased female participation in the employment market are slowly challenging the very basis of the male breadwinner model (Lewis 2003; Craig 2007; Duncan 1995; Haas 2005; Crompton 2001). Lewis’s (2001: 155) recent work in this area also concludes that ‘the pattern of work between men and women in households is now much more difficult to predict, but patterns of unpaid work have not changed so much’.

Two issues/questions arise from this discussion: (1) There is a high level of uncertainty about the impact the current socio-economic transition will have on welfare provisions; (2) Changes in women’s employment patterns have not led to a substantive reallocation of unpaid work within the family. As Lewis (2001: 158) explains, “female employment is now expected, although to what degree and for which groups of women remains unclear. This is not surprising given that the new assumptions may actually be running ahead of behavioural change”.

Policy makers have thus turned towards the principle of activation in order to find a way forward in the context of an increasingly insecure labour market. The individual, rather than the family, has been the focus of this shift. In this context, women (and specifically women with care responsibilities) become the target of policy initiatives as their participation in the formal economy is seen as central to long term economic success. As Lewis and Bennett (2003: 43) explain, “as a set of processes, individualization has major implications for family formation, labour supply and gender equality”. The picture that is emerging, however, is rather complex. These initiatives are coming up against other policies and social norms about gender hierarchies and divisions of labour (Lewis and Bennett 2003: 43).

Clearly, gender norms are important but are not the only issue that needs to be considered in this analysis. More general trends in welfare provision, specifically welfare retrenchment, are a particularly notable reason for encouraging wider female participation in the official labour market. Yet, the question of care remains unresolved (Lewis 2003: 178).

The question that follows is whether such a shift in policy denotes a wider change in attitudes and a move towards substantive equality (based on an equitable division of care work in the private sphere). The shift towards an adult worker model is based on two key principles: individuation and commodification. In order words, benefits are ascribed to individuals on the basis of their interactions with the employment market. Women’s position in society is thus no longer solely defined by their role as carers; but they face increasing pressure to participate in the official labour market. Lewis’s (2006) assessment of this transition is not entirely positive. Despite an increasing preference for long part-time hours (thus the adult worker model formulation), she raises some points of caution: (1) Women are over-represented in part-time employment; (2) Expectations of women’s contributions to the family income remain unspecified. Ultimately, the basis for this shift in ‘paradigm’ (Lewis 2006: 34) is based on the commodification of care work, not a change in attitudes towards the importance and/or value of care. As she further points out, “limits on paid working time are necessary, but not sufficient to secure men in particular time to care” (Lewis 2006: 35). The move towards the establishment of the adult worker model should, therefore, not be seen as unproblematic. Social and economic
structures that defined power relations in the public and the private sphere under the male breadwinner models have changed but have not been removed (Lewis 2003: 180).

Although it is tempting to talk about the adult worker model as a monolithic approach to increasing female employment rates, Lewis (2001) identified at least four dual breadwinner family types ranging from a division of labour more closely associated with the male breadwinner model (male partner in full time employment, female partner working short part time hours) to one centred around full economic activation of both partners (dual career family). Haas (2005) also provides a detailed breakdown of different types of breadwinner models that are becoming established. Haas’s typology allows for greater variety of family types and arrangements. Building on Lewis’s (1992) earlier work, she includes the traditional breadwinner model and the modified breadwinner model (male partner in full time employment, female partner in part time employment). This contrasts with the egalitarian employment model in which ‘gainful employment is universalized, but care and housework are not. It is mainly the woman who carries out private unpaid work in the household’ Haas (2005: 496). Her last two models, however, are the most radical. Under the universal carer model both men and women are both workers and carers, thus allowing the family to continue to take the lion’s share in the social function of care, but challenging gender divisions of labour in the private sphere. Finally, under the role reversal model the female partner takes on the role of breadwinner. This model is the least likely to take root, she argues, partly because it challenges deeply rooted assumptions about gender roles and the individual’s relationship with the market and welfare structures.

The problem with this shift in policy is that women’s activation continues to be constrained by social norms about care and women’s role in the family. In other words, according to Lewis (2001: 161) it assumes a level of economic independence that has not been achieved by the vast majority of women. Crompton’s (2001: 268-9) analysis of this transition supports this assessment, adding that a shift in favour of women’s full time employment is more likely to challenge gender hierarchies and divisions of labour upon which the traditional male breadwinner model is based. Although increased participation will inevitably have an impact on arrangements in the private sphere, without a substantive change in attitudes towards the social function of caring this model rests on women continuing to take on the double burden of care and paid employment.

A number of interlinked questions arise from the analysis of changing care-work patterns presented here: (1) Is the introduction of the adult worker model tantamount to substantive equality? (2) Can a policy shift towards supporting a dual breadwinner family help to reverse the current decline in birth rates? (3) Will the establishment of the adult worker model neutralize the impact of gender power hierarchies? Although a policy shift in favour of activation and individualization of rights is increasingly being accepted as the norm, “it is, in essence, the gendered divisions of unpaid work in the workplace that lie behind the problems posed by this shift towards an adult worker model family” (Lewis 2006: 34). Policy blindness towards the contradictory interests of employment and care only contribute to forestalling the
reorganization of employment structures necessary for the establishment of gender sensitive work-care structures (Crompton 2001: 283).

In terms of the questions outlined above, it is worth noting that much of current policy action in this field is premised on the acceptance of the commodification of care work. This results from a narrow focus on activation and thus an implicit blindness to gender hierarchies in the private sphere (Lewis 2006: 34; Lewis 2003: 180). As Lewis (2006: 53) further points out, “it is particularly hard to devise policies that encourage men to change their behaviour; compulsion is antithetical to both the idea of genuine choice and to the ethics of care”. And again, “it is difficult for policies designed to reconcile work and family responsibilities to actually strike a balance in terms of the incentives for both men and women to work and care” (Lewis 2006: 36).

This recognition is important in the context of European social policy and the EES in particular. As the analysis presented here has shown, “‘employment-anchored’ social policy, is not likely to effectively address the issue of gender equality” (Lewis 2006: 37). Clearly, activation policies and increased labour market participation are the easiest way for the EU and its Member States to maintain a competitive labour market in the global economy. Yet these policies are neither constructed in a social vacuum nor gender neutral (Lewis 2001). The long term implications of increasing female labour market participation without consideration for gender hierarchies and divisions of labour may not be felt in the immediate future but may nevertheless have long term repercussions on the demographic make up of Europe.

This section has sought to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of current changes in European labour market trends. The shift from the male breadwinner model to the adult worker model inevitably poses important questions about the relationship between employment policies and the social function of care. More importantly, it highlights the implicit tension between welfare retrenchment leading to the family taking an even greater share of the care burden and the need for some commodification of care in order to implement the overall aims of employment policies based on individualization and activation. The next section of this chapter will look at female employment trends and seek to unpack the complex web that informs women’s choices about work and childbearing.

**Women’s Employment and Participation in the Official Labour Market**

Changes in the socio-economic position of women in Europe since the end of the Second World War have been widely documented. Increased female participation in the official labour market and the political arena are only two of the key areas in which women’s presence has become more noticeable. Recent surveys highlight how deeply rooted this transition has become in the consciousness of European women (Cousins 1999; Muehberger 2000; Rubery et al, 1999; Lewis 2001; Crompton 2001). Women’s expectations seem to have changed with an increased focus on

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1 For details on women’s employment rates in the first half of the 20th century, see Bock and Thane 1994; Stier et al 2001.
the public sphere and particularly the employment sector. This section will look at current trends in women’s employment and the structural impediments that women have to contend with when negotiating work and family responsibilities. In order to do this, I will assess the relationship between employment policies, life choices (such as mothering), and social/welfare models outlined in the previous section of this chapter.

A number of factors can help to explain how this transition has occurred. Firstly, changes in employment law and increased awareness of equal opportunities have facilitated women’s entry into the labour force. Secondly, women have surpassed men in terms of educational attainment. For instance, in 2003 women accounted for 54.6 per cent of all students enrolled in higher education. Despite the persistence of gender segregation in terms of chosen disciplines, these trends highlight a greater involvement of young women in the public sphere and hence higher expectations of employment following the end of this period of study. Yet, women’s success in education has not automatically converted into greater success in the employment market. It is interesting to note that there is a high proportion of highly skilled and educated women working short/part time hours (Eurostats 2006; Rubery et al 2001; Del Boca et al 2004). Given these statistics, it is important to look beyond factors such as education and training to explain gender inequalities in the labour market.

Women’s role in the social function of reproduction has been put forward by many scholars (Guerrina 2005; Craig 2007) as the main reason why women still lag behind men in the area of employment. It is interesting to note that there is little difference in employment rates and/or the number of hours worked by single men and women. However, women’s participation in the official labour market declines sharply following the arrival of children. And, the higher the number of children present in a household, the less likely is the mother to engage in paid employment (Aliaga 2005). This trend is particularly important as it highlights welfare states’ continued reliance on women fulfilling the social function of care. In this context, wage differentials between men and women, as well as socio-economic hierarchies in the labour market, ultimately ensure that childbearing has a direct impact on women’s and/or families’ choices about employment.

Yet, women’s participation in the official labour market is increasingly being advanced as central to finding a solution to Europe’s impending labour shortage, as well as to promote competition and economic growth. As a matter of fact, the Lisbon strategy established a target of 60 per cent female employment by 2010 (Del Boca 2004; Lewis 2006). Achievement of this objective has been sought through the implementation of active labour market policies, which reinforce the current trends towards the establishment of the adult worker model in Europe. Unfortunately, structural issues that underpin inequality and gender power hierarchies were largely ignored during the negotiations, despite the high profile of the equal opportunities pillar in this process. As Fagan et al. (2005: 569) explain, “attention to the quality of women’s jobs (e.g. pay, segregation, working time) were largely neglected even though reductions in the gender pay gap was identified as a policy target and included as a structural indicator in the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines”. In terms of the analysis presented here, it is interesting to note that the provision of childcare did acquire a more prominent status and was included in the 2002 Barcelona targets.
This harks back to Lewis’s (2006) analysis about the commodification of care. As families (i.e. women) become more engaged in the official labour market they are less able to fulfil the social function of care. What emerges is a shift in favour of outsourcing care responsibilities to the public sphere, rather than a reallocation of care time between partners in the traditional family (Lewis 2006; Fagan et al. 2005).

This discussion raises some important issues that will be considered in more detail later in this chapter regarding the ability of the EES to provide the necessary framework for the development of a multidimensional approach to equality. For now, it is worth noting that the inclusion of childcare within this process is not the result of increased awareness of the role that social and economic policies play in reinforcing gender power hierarchies. Rather, it reflects a simple acknowledgement that in order for women to be able to enter the official labour market, the issue of care needs to be addressed. Improvements in the provision of childcare are an economic and/or strategic objective, rather than a way to promote substantive equality.

This discussion takes on a whole new dimension within the context of the debate about declining fertility rates. There are some very interesting research results coming to the fore in this particular area. Hilgeman and Butts (2004: 6-7) found that there is a negative correlation between female educational attainment and fertility rates. They forecast that as women seek to expand their participation in the official labour market on the back of their increased educational attainment, fertility rates will continue to decline (Hilgeman and Butts 2004: 20). Still focusing on women’s education and training as a variable, Rubery et al. (2001: 37-41) found that this variable only marginally improves the likelihood of employment following the birth of children. These studies support the conclusions arrived at by Craig (2007) and Del Boca et al (2004) that mothering has a negative impact on women’s participation in the official labour market.

In order to explain these trends, our first port of call has to be the persistent inequalities and power hierarchies that underpin employment and social structures in the EU. For instance, women’s unemployment rates continue to be higher than men’s (9.6 per cent against 7.6 per cent), which includes striking disparities between Member States. At present Ireland has the lowest rate of women’s unemployment (3.8 per cent) whereas Poland has reported the highest at 19.1 per cent (Eurostat 2006). These statistics highlight persistent problems with access to the labour market for women. EU employment statistics for 2005 put men and women’s employment rates as follows: 56 per cent of women compared to 71 per cent of men are in paid employment, and, on average 1/3 of women are employed part-time, with a high of 75 per cent of all employed women working part-time in the Netherlands (Eurostat 2006).

These problems are further exacerbated by the persistent gender pay gap, currently reported at 15 per cent, and the gender segregation of the labour market, whereby women tend to be concentrated in part-time employment and the service sector (Eurostat 2006). These are some of the realities that women are faced with when seeking to reconcile the demands of work in the official labour market with the responsibilities of care in the private sphere. EU statistics point to the persistence of gender divisions of labour and time allocation within the family (Eurostat 2006).
These findings are supported by more qualitative studies which look at the impact of family structures on labour market participation. Kay (2003: 236) in particular found that the extent to which the burden of reconciling demands on the household falls upon women is a constant theme in accounts of family life. Findings from interviews are in line with Eurostat data, which show strong inequality in the distribution of domestic tasks. More importantly, she draws attention to the disparity between policy areas: “the widespread encouragement for women to further their education and training and equip themselves for employment has not been matched by the necessary infrastructure to support increased labour market activity by parents. Formal childcare is frequently inadequate” (Kay 2003: 236). As Duncan (2000: 309-10) further explains, the structures that underpin the male breadwinner model upon which European welfare states have become reliant for the provision of care are unable to support women’s entry into the official labour market. However, a shift towards the dual breadwinner family or the adult worker model provides only a temporary solution. As discussed in the previous section, more work needs to be done to assess the adverse effects of activation policies and the establishment of the adult worker model on women’s double burden.

This evidence led Hilgeman and Butts (2004) as well as McDonald (2000) to conclude that declining fertility rates result from a mismatch between women’s expectations on the one hand and socio-economic structures for the promotion of gender equality on the other. More specifically, McDonald (2000) found that those countries with social structures most aligned with the male-breadwinner model are those that have experienced the most substantial drop in birth rates in the last thirty years. The assumption that women will continue to fulfil the primary function of care is set against the demands of the employment market and women’s expectations of their potential contributions to the public sphere and household income. In this context, it is interesting to note Del Boca’s et al. (2004) assessment of the current state of affairs in Mediterranean states. They come to the conclusion that it is possible to draw a correlation between declining birth rates on the one hand and conflict between women’s roles as carers and workers on the other.

What is interesting to note is that both studies point to policies for the reconciliation between work and family life as a possible avenue to resolve this conflict. In particular, Hilgeman and Butts (2004: 20) argue that widely available, good quality, flexible and affordable childcare, rather than parental leave arrangements, would have the greatest impact on fertility rates. These findings are interesting as they draw attention to the norms that define employment patterns. In short, the provision of childcare, unlike leave arrangements, does not challenge traditional assumptions about care. The commodification of care allows women to reconcile work and family life, but does not challenge gender divisions of labour in the family. The focus on care provisions thus highlights the very bias at the heart of work-life balance policies: despite the gender neutrality of the language they are addressed to women workers.

These findings thus seem to support current thinking at European level which has sought to foster a shift from the traditional male breadwinner model to the adult worker model (Lewis 2001). As discussed in the previous section, the assumption that underpins this new model of employment and welfare is that “all adults should take employment, and that in families there will be two earners, but this could be on a full
or part time basis” (Annesley 2006: 6). The focus of this policy shift is in favour of women’s activation; however, it does not challenge the norms that define/underpin gender power hierarchies in the public and private sphere. This will ultimately turn out to be the most significant shortcoming of the EES and its associated targets.

**Demographic Trends and Policy Making Choices**

Women’s entry in the official labour market has been advanced as one of the main reasons for declining birth rates. Concern over the longer term repercussions this shift entails, particularly in terms of demographic trends and traditional family structures has implicitly underpinned employment policies for a number of years (Hakim 2003). Duncan (2000) goes as far as arguing that this is a key area of concern that has helped to define European equal rights policies. National family policies are increasingly incorporating pronatalist elements such as economic incentives and extended leave. However, recent studies suggest that family policy has only a limited impact on increasing birth rates. The extent to which Member States have incorporated the family friendly/work-life balance agenda within their policy structures seems to have a much greater impact on birth rate differentials (Duncan 2000; European Commission 2004: 14). As Hilgeman and Butts (2004: 10) explain, economic incentives and leave alone have only limited impact on family choices. As they further point out, “pronatalist norms create the expectation that most people have [or] should have children. Such norms tend to have a particularly strong impact on women as the responsibility of childrearing has fallen disproportionately on them” (Hilgeman and Butts 2004: 4). This is the reason why it is important to consider the relationship between family friendly policies and family life and substantive equality.

Reconciliation between work and family life is now a key pillar of EU employment policies. EU institutions have recognized that in order to promote women’s participation in the official labour market, employment structures and policies need to tackle the issue of care. The Lisbon strategy, in particular, presents work-life as essential in tackling gender inequalities in Europe (Guerrina 2003; Paraskeva 2003). Thus far, EU policies have sought to promote a flexible approach to reconciliation between work and family life, with a particular focus on paid and un-paid leave (Guerrina 2005; Guerrina 2003; Paraskeva 2003).² Despite acknowledging the importance of structural impediments to women’s participation in the official labour market, EU strategy has focused on policies that shift the burden of implementation onto employers, rather than tackling structural impediments to reconciliation between work and family life such as the chronic absence of affordable and good quality child-care in many Member States and the unequal distribution of care work in the family (Paraskeva 2003).

Over the last five years there have been a number of statements that sought to acknowledge the impact of socio-economic structures to women’s participation in

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² For instance, see the Pregnant Workers Directive (92/85/EC), the Parental Leave Directive (96/34/EC), and the Part-Time Workers Directive (97/81/EC).
the official labour market. Paraskeva (2003: 4) for instance claims that in March 2002 the European Council went one step further and set targets for the supply of childcare facilities. By 2010, Member States should provide childcare for at least 33 per cent of children under 3 years of age, and 90 per cent of children aged between 3 and mandatory school age. Already in their Employment Plans for 2002, several Member States reported new measures to increase childcare services and fixed national targets.

In terms of the debate about demographic trends, there is some evidence to point to the fact that improved access and affordability of childcare services is the best way to promote women’s activation in the labour market (Hilgeman and Butts 2004; Giuliani and Lewis 2005).

Historically, the focus of EU equal rights policies has been on encouraging women to enter the official labour market by creating a level playing field. They have therefore focused on formal equality (Giuliani and Lewis 2005: 6; Guerrina 2005). Giuliani and Lewis (2005: 6) have put forward a particularly poignant analysis of this policy bias. They argue that “little attention has been paid to the pursuit of gender equality in respect to unpaid work at the household level. It is also significant that the principle of equality is deployed in EU level documents in such a way as to eclipse the equally difficult issue of choice”. It is interesting to note that EES reinforces this trend, whereby the focus on women’s activation has been at the expense of a more concerted effort for the achievement of substantive equality. Even the renewed focus on the reconciliation between work and family life is less about challenging gender power hierarchies than it is about providing a viable framework for increasing women’s employment rates. In this context, these policies may have a positive outcome in terms of demographic trends, but such an achievement will be at the expense of social justice, as the newly established dual breadwinner model will simply crystallize gender power hierarchies in the public and the private sphere.

The latest Commission Green Paper on demographic change highlights quite how entrenched these trends have become. The European Commission published in 2005 a Green Paper, Confronting demographic change, outlining the challenges facing EU Member States over the next couple of decades. The basis for the Commission’s consultation process is that “Europeans would like to have more children. But they are discouraged from doing so by all kinds of problems that limit their freedom of choice, including in finding housing” (European Commission 2005: 2). The Green Paper recognizes the difficulties faced by many women/families to reconcile their care responsibilities with employment in the official labour market. This conflict of interests, in turn, has led to a downturn in intergenerational solidarity as evidenced in the decline in fertility rates.

The Green Paper focuses on five key issues/areas: (1) Work-life balance; (2) Integration of young people in the official labour market; (3) Working life cycles; (4) (Re-) integration of the elderly in the official labour market; (5) Intergenerational solidarity. The main focus of the paper is the forecasted decline in working age population. Current forecasts estimate a decline of 20.8 million workers between 2005 and 2030 (European Commission 2005). Ultimately, this policy document concentrates on the long term impact of demographic trends on the economic well being of the Single Market. The following quote summarizes the rationale for policy
action in this field: “A low birth rate is a challenge for the public authorities. Never in history has there been economic growth without population growth” (European Commission 2005: 5). The assumption that underpins this change in policy focus is that economic stagnation and/or decline will result from demographic decline. Promoting substantive equality and challenging the gender power hierarchies that ultimately have produced these trends are less of an issue for European policy makers.

Clearly this paper is the result of increasing public policy concern over an ageing population and the impact it will have on the long term survival of the European social model. The strategies adopted thus far by the Member States to deal with this challenge have been: (1) Raising compulsory retirement age; (2) Support for non-linear, non-standard career patterns; (3) Life-long learning. Finally, the Green Paper identifies three key factors that will have an impact on Europe’s demographic trends: (1) Lack of a demographic motor, (2) Immigration; (3) Enlargement.

The Green Paper implicitly recognizes the impact of gender power hierarchies on Europe’s demographic transition; however, there is little in the way of a critique of those socio-economic structures that serve to limit women’s choices and have led to a decline in birth rates. Reconciliation between work and family life is introduced as a strategy for encouraging women/families to have more children, and thus becomes instrumental to promoting intergenerational solidarity. The assumption made by the Commission is that Europeans are having fewer children because of economic necessity, as opposed to a change in culture. The key preoccupation for the Green Paper is how to encourage women to enter the labour market whilst continuing to fulfil the social function of reproduction (European Commission 2005). Little or no consideration is given to the issue of substantive equality.

Comparing the demographic situation across a range of countries highlights that there is a positive correlation between the implementation of family friendly policies and the maintenance of sustainable birth-rates (Del Boca et al. 2004). The Green Paper acknowledges the difficulties entrenched in changing socio-cultural norms and attitudes. Citing a 2004 Eurobarometer survey, it points out that the vast majority of European men (84 per cent) have not taken advantage of new rights for working fathers such as paternity and parental leave.

Given the potential bestowed upon work-life balance measures to promote substantive equality, it is interesting to note some of the questions posed by the European Commission during this consultation process:

How can a more balanced distribution of household and family tasks between men and women be encouraged? Should the award of certain benefits or advantages (leave, etc.) be linked to an equal distribution of tasks between the sexes? How best to ensure an adequate income for both parents on parental leave? (European Commission 2005: 5)

These are pertinent and important questions. However, the issue that remains unanswered is how can these proposals be enforced? Even the discussion of parental leave seems to disregard current trends, whereby women/mothers are the main beneficiaries of the leave entitlements. The next section will explore the ways in
which the EES can help to develop a multidimensional approach to the dilemma posed by the conflicting interests of care and employment.

The EES, Demographic Trends and Gender Power Hierarchies – Priorities and Outcomes

At a superficial level the shift in policy focus and rhetoric outlined in the previous section seems to acknowledge feminist critiques of equal opportunities policies. In particular, it appears to be answering calls for greater links between public and private spheres, and to ensure greater recognition of women’s double burden. This section looks at how the EES can be a tool for the achievement of the policy objectives outlined in the Commission’s Green Paper. In other words, it will assess the ways in which it can be used to establish a multidimensional approach to equality, particularly in view of recent feminist criticisms of the new Lisbon strategy (Rubery et al. 2003; Pfister 2006).

What I am particularly interested in looking at is how reconciliation between work and family life is seen as a way to ease women’s choices about mothering and employment, and thus can become a useful tool both in the context of activation policies and in easing the pressure of current demographic trends (see for instance, Del Boca et al. 2004). Giuliani and Lewis (2005: 6) have argued that there is a link between the de-familialization of care and women’s employment choices. This policy option, however, also serves to mask the problem of women’s double burden and the continued reliance on women’s unpaid work in the private sphere. As they further explain: “the de- familialization of care work necessarily follows, and there is no further discussion of gender inequalities in unpaid work. Nevertheless, very different ideas about the desirability of ‘choice’ in regard to the performance of unpaid work exist, both at the level of national governments and among people, and the willingness to undertake informal care work is unlikely to become less important in the future” (Giullari and Lewis 2005: 6).

This analysis leads them to conclude that women’s agency is ultimately limited by the social function of care and the persistence of power structures and inequalities in the domestic sphere (Giullari and Lewis 2005: 18). The lack of political will for putting forward a sustained challenge to traditional gender roles further compounds this problem. These issues are not too far removed from current debates about the EES. The Commission’s 2002 Evaluation of the European Employment Strategy provides an interesting example in this context. By drawing attention to the potential long term effects of establishing a dual breadwinner model on children it implicitly opens the debate about the role and position of working mothers in Europe. As Rubery et al (2003: 483) further outline, “here there is explicit questioning of the goal of the EES to promote dual-earner households where there are children present as a means of meeting the twin targets of equal opportunities and a high employment rate”.

This latest statement supports the findings of a number of earlier studies that have pointed towards the emergence of a conservative agenda within European employment policies, particularly as regards the position of working mothers (Caracciolo di
Torrella 2000; Guerrina 2005, 2003; McGlynn 2001a, 2001b, 2000). The findings of these studies draw attention to the enduring conflict between women’s participation in the official labour market and traditional assumptions about the social function of mothering. Yet, this discussion takes on a whole new dimension when taking into consideration current demographic trends and the impact that this particular position has had and continues to have on women’s choices about mothering.

This analysis supports the findings of Hilgeman and Butts’ (2004: 20) study about the relationship between the availability of care services and fertility rates. In particular, they found that childcare is one of the most significant variables in determining fertility rates. In particular, they argue that childcare services, rather than parental leave arrangements, may provide a more suitable avenue for reconciling the conflict of responsibilities faced by working women. This argument is based on extensive evidence that parental leave and general policies for the reconciliation between work and family life have not succeeded in engendering a change in social norms and practices, thus leading to a more equitable distribution of work in the family.

Giullari and Lewis (2005: 10) also warn against the shortcomings of an approach to labour market policy that underestimates the complexities of care in the private sphere. More specifically, they look at the impact the commodification of care will have on gender equality and gender justice. From this position the shift towards the adult worker model shifts the responsibility of care to the public sphere but fails to challenge gender norms that continue to portray women as the primary carers. This is a powerful argument that challenges what has recently become accepted wisdom about the link between declining birth rates and women’s employment practices. It is thus not women’s participation in the official labour market that leads families to have fewer children, but it is women’s double burden that makes motherhood a more difficult choice. This analysis thus shifts the responsibility of declining birth rates from women to social structures/norms that assume gender based divisions of care.

Despite the rhetoric that a shift from the male breadwinner model towards the adult worker model should help to ease the pressure on women’s choices, it does not reflect the social reality in Europe. Evidence from states that have made the most significant progress (e.g. the Netherlands; Sweden) towards the establishment of these arrangements is that there remain significant gender differences in employment patterns. In these countries, horizontal segregation of the labour market tends to be common place, and women’s participation in paid employment has not engendered a significant change in gender divisions of labour in the family (Kay 2003; Giullari and Lewis 2005; Kugelber 2006: 152-3).

From a policy perspective, the establishment of the adult worker model seems to have positive outcomes for fertility rates, in as far as the introduction of flexible employment patterns and more readily available part-time work allow women to reconcile work and family life. However, it ultimately fails to challenge gender norms and power hierarchies. Ultimately, this model is based on the assumption that women are and will continue to be the primary carers. Moreover, it fails to challenge the presumed link between time spent at the workplace, commitment to work and productivity (Kugelberg 2006: 153). If women’s contributions to the household
income continue to be secondary, then the adult worker model can only have limited emancipatory power.

Conclusions – Lessons of the European Experience

This chapter has sought to explore the link between the establishment of women’s activation policies and demographic trends. More specifically, it sought to assess how women’s expectations and perceptions of the impact of mothering on their ability to participate in the official labour market has led to specific choices about the ideal number of children. The evidence presented points to a ‘new’ social trend whereby women have exercised agency by withdrawing from the social function of reproduction. The chapter has also sought to link this analysis to current debates taking place at the European level about women’s activation. In this context, I put forward the following questions: What is the impact of active labour market policies on women’s ability to reconcile work and family life? What are the overall objectives of these policies in terms of: (a) The equal opportunities agenda, particularly with reference to substantive equality; (b) The current decline in birth rates; (c) The establishment of the adult worker model? Through the application of gender sensitive lens to the analysis presented here, it is possible to bring to light a number of conflicting discourses, the aim of which is not to challenge traditional gender power hierarchies.

The analysis of the current transition towards the dual breadwinner family in particular highlights some of the interests that are at work in this particular policy area. On the one hand, economic pressures brought about by the impending demographic crisis necessitate a novel approach to social and employment policy. On the other hand, there is recognition that social and cultural changes need to be accommodated by policies. At first glance this appears to be a rather positive picture for the future of gender policies in Europe. However, Lewis and Guilleri’s (2005) criticism of the adult worker model highlights the dangers of embarking upon this particular policy approach without detailed understanding of the impact of gender power hierarchies on women’s choices and women’s ability to negotiate their position within the family and the official labour market.

What starts to transpire from current discourses on activation is that women are seen predominantly as a reserve army of labour that can help to ensure long term economic growth of the European Single Market. If this is the case, then these policies will have only limited impact on redressing gender power hierarchies and inequalities in the public and private spheres. The establishment of the adult worker model will simply shift some of those power dynamics from the private to the public and will ultimately increase women’s double burden.

Evidence from a number of studies points to the dichotomy between rhetoric and reality in the redistribution of unpaid work in the family. Whereas an increasing number of men would accept the discourse of sharing domestic and care work, evidence shows that there has been only a superficial change in family dynamics and practice. There are three key questions that emerge from the analysis presented here that warrant further exploration: Is low fertility a sign of women’s agency? Is
social engineering acceptable in order to forestall economic downturn in Europe? Is substantive equality going to be the by-product of this process?

Finally, in terms of the impact of the EES on the establishment of a substantive equality regime, many questions remain to be addressed. There is increasing evidence that, following a short period in which gender became central to the achievement of the EES, it is now being increasingly marginalized (Pfister 2006; Rubery et al 2003). Persistent focus on quantity of work rather than quality of employment is likely to have negative repercussions on women employment in the labour market, as they continue to make up the vast majority of atypical workers. The shift in favour of economic efficiency and growth seem to have been achieved at the expense of social justice (Fagan et al 2005; Busby 2005). As noted in this chapter, this may ultimately have a positive effect on demographic trends, but it will only serve to mask the persistence of gender inequalities.

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