1. Introduction

Paid work and care work are fundamental to the lives of adult family members and it has become increasingly difficult and onerous to manage successfully a job alongside care for dependants in the context of rapid and dramatic family and labour market change. Men and women must juggle the competing demands of work and family and many commentators have documented the overspill of stress due to work–family imbalance into both the workplace and, more often, the family. The problems of balancing responsibilities are not the same for both sexes. Women and, during recent decades, mothers in particular, have increased their participation in the labour market greatly, but men have not increased their participation in unpaid household work to a matching degree. The issue underlying work–family balance is that of the gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work, which has also long been a fundamental source of gender inequalities.

Public interest in work and family balance policies has expanded significantly in recent years. From the policymaker’s perspective, the issue is the extent to which state intervention in helping family members to balance work and family responsibilities is justified. If a case can be made, there is the further issue as to whether more effort should go into targeting the work or the family side of the equation, and what form policy should take. The provision of childcare, the possibility of taking leave from work to care for dependants, and the development of more flexible working patterns on the job have been the main policy initiatives directly targeted on the problem of work–family balance. In large measure, the focus of Western governments has remained the paid and unpaid work involved in fulfilling work and family responsibilities, even when the terminology used to describe the policy field has shifted to ‘work–life balance’, signalling the desire both to include those without care responsibilities and to find new ways of managing increasingly diverse workforces.

Policies to address the problem of work and family balance have been and are a rather small part of the welfare state when measured in terms of the public expenditure devoted to them, even though rising policy interest in this field since the late 1990s has been matched in many countries by rising expenditure – nowhere more so than in the UK. It is notable that the broad field of family policy, which may include the provision of a variety of cash benefits and services, has expanded significantly, unlike
many other areas of the welfare state, and has tended to be directed particularly towards the support of working parents (Gauthier, 2002). Many countries with historically low levels of public expenditure on the family have increased the amounts they spend (OECD, 2007), and the amount spent on formal provision for social care (for all dependants, young and old) has also increased in most Western states since the mid-1990s (Daly, 2002, 2005). On the employment side, considerably more attention has been paid by Western European governments to the promotion of labour market participation by all adults via so-called ‘activation’ policies.

The mix of government initiatives has included the direct provision of services, but also: the funding of services delivered by a variety of providers and the provision of cash benefits directly to the consumers of services; the provision of cash benefits to those taking leave from work to care; and efforts to regulate conditions at work. Thus, intervention to enable paid and unpaid work has focused on both the care and employment sides of the equation and has blurred the boundaries between cash and services. Some costs in respect of flexible working, as well as to permit employees to stay at home to care and, more rarely in most countries, in relation to the provision of care services, have also fallen on employers.

The task of reconciling work and care has long been accepted as a job for government in most Western and Northern European countries. The term ‘reconciliation’ comes from continental Western Europe, with ‘work–family balance’ and ‘work–life balance’ as much later additions from the English-speaking countries. Work and family balance only became an explicit policy goal in the UK in 1997, with the election of the first New Labour government. In the English-speaking countries, the problem of combining paid and unpaid work has long been considered a private matter, and for the most part still is in the US, whereas in countries such as France or those of Scandinavia it has long been accepted as a legitimate role for the state. However, since the late 1990s, at the European Union (EU) level and in member states, this policy field has increasingly been recognised as having a significant bearing on some of the new challenges facing modern welfare states (Pierson, 2001), particularly the achievement of higher employment rates as a means to economic competitiveness and growth.

Work and family policies are often seen as a solution to a range of other policy problems as well: particularly as a means of addressing the challenges of an ageing society by enabling women to work and thereby improving the dependency ratio, and of countering falling fertility rates, which are the main cause of population ageing and which are often thought to be exacerbated by lack of support for women workers (for example OECD, 2007). In some places work–family reconciliation has also been seen as the best way of tackling child poverty (in the UK, by encouraging and enabling mothers
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– especially lone mothers – to work), and of promoting children’s educational achievement (particularly in the UK and Germany, by promoting high-quality early learning). These policies fit the criterion of ‘social investment’ (Lister, 2003) – designed to ensure sustainable economic prosperity – which has increasingly been used to justify public expenditure on social issues in the European context since the late 1990s. As the agenda for work and family policies has widened, so has the political interest in them.

However, in the vast majority of EU member states gender equality has been either a secondary goal, or has not been an explicit goal at all. Yet at base, the problem of work–family reconciliation arises from asymmetric gendered behaviour (which may or may not be voluntary): women have increased their hours of paid work to a much greater extent than men have increased their hours of household work, and this holds true for all developed countries (Gershuny, 2000). The problem, therefore, is fundamentally one of gender inequalities. But it is as easy in this analysis as with one centring on employment or demographic change to perceive the issue in terms of problems affecting women alone: women used to do most of the unpaid work of care in families, but now that they have entered the labour market in large numbers there is a looming ‘care gap’. The problem thus becomes one of enabling women to work more and to continue to do care work. A more gendered analysis of work and family balance issues at the level of the household also swiftly arrives at the issue of unpaid work, but does not necessarily conclude that the nature of the problem consists of enabling women to carry on doing it. Nevertheless, governments tend to focus their attention on paid work and to address care work only insofar as it impinges on employment goals.

If reconciliation policies are seen as the province of women, they are likely to fail to address the role of men and hence the issue of gender equality. Indeed, in many countries outside Scandinavia, policy in this field has been relentlessly gender-neutral. In most Western European states, and increasingly in some Nordic countries, the recent emphasis has been on the importance of increasing ‘parental choice’, which obscures both the differential interests and power of men and women in the family. In fact, work and family policies involve consideration of the politics and distribution of time and money between families with and without care responsibilities, and also between men and women.

FAMILY CHANGE

Family change has been large and rapid over the 30 years since the late 1970s. It has multiple dimensions; two of the most important are changes
in family form and the changing contributions that men and women make to the family.

On the first of these changes, there is now much greater ‘family fluidity’, with people moving in and out of marriage and cohabitation, at least in Northern and Western Europe, resulting in a growing proportion of lone-mother families, which inevitably experience particular difficulty in combining paid work and care work. Furthermore, in these new circumstances the meaning and implications of marriage and family-building change. For women in particular, marriage may now be perceived more as a risk than a protection against risk, as was traditionally the case (Lewis, 2005). Certainly, traditional specialisation by men as breadwinners and women as carers appears risky in those countries where the divorce rate is high and stable (Oppenheimer, 1994, 2000). Cohabitation may appear easier to get out of, but poses a risk of additional instability in some countries – particularly the UK – especially if the couple have a child.

On the second of these changes, a married or cohabiting couple who reach a satisfactory accommodation as joint earners prior to having children must usually renegotiate their financial and care contributions to family life once children arrive. This is often achieved by the mother ‘scaling back’ in some way, often by taking a lower-level job and/or by working fewer hours (Becker and Moen, 1999), which may cause tensions at the household level and may also result in inequalities as social provision of all kinds becomes more firmly attached to labour market participation.

Indeed, the nature of the contributions that adults make to families has changed dramatically, and, taken alongside the changes in family form, have made policy assumptions based on the traditional, two-parent, stable, male breadwinner/female carer family model difficult to sustain. Dual-earner families have become the norm in most Western countries, although the number of hours women work outside the home varies hugely between countries (Rubery et al., 1999; Lewis et al., 2008; see also Chapter 2). While female labour participation rates remain lower in Southern Europe, those women who are in the workforce tend to work full-time. In much of Western Europe many more women work, but part-time, often in a ‘one-and-a-half earner model’ family, extending to a ‘one-and-three-quarter earner model’ in the Scandinavian countries. Indeed, Mutari and Figart (2001) have argued that gender differentiation is increasingly based on time – with men working full-time and women part-time, so that their paid work is combined with domestic work. Some form of part-time work for women has historically been the main way of reconciling work and family responsibilities in much of Western and Northern Europe, supported in varying degrees by state policies that, for example, provide a statutory
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entitlement to mothers of young children to work fewer hours and/or guarantee pro rata benefit entitlements to those in part-time employment. In the US, women have tended to work full-time and to rely on (the relatively cheaper) market provision of care along with tax allowances for childcare that benefit the better-off in particular.

While fertility rates have fallen, dramatically so in Southern Europe, the volume of informal care has not noticeably lessened. First, there are growing proportions of frail elderly people needing care (indeed, in Southern Europe, particularly in Italy, families provide more care for this group than elsewhere); second, the expectation of more intensive parenting has grown (Bianchi, 2000); and third, despite the growth in the provision of formal institutional care, this is often fragmented between different public and private providers and substitutes imperfectly for informal provision (Lewis, 2006). The time-use data on care work for children show that men have increased their contribution, albeit from a very low base, and that women have also increased their care work slightly, but have reduced the time they spend on housework the more time they spend in the labour market (Bianchi, 2000; Gershuny, 2000). People report feeling more rushed in many countries, notwithstanding the fact that the reported amount of leisure time has not decreased (Folbre and Bittman, 2004). The key to understanding this probably lies in the extent to which the majority of households now have two earners, and that even in countries where a high proportion of women work part-time, their hours have tended to increase. This means that the constant negotiation and juggling of work and family responsibilities is the order of the day (Jacobs and Gerson, 2004).

Trends in the two main dimensions of family change are by no means the same in different EU member states – while fertility is very low in Southern Europe, it is much higher in countries such as France and the UK, although still under the 2.1 children needed for replacement. There is also considerable variation in both the rate of female employment and the number of hours women, especially mothers, work. It is very difficult to establish how far these differing patterns are voluntary and how far they are the product of structural constraints or ideas about what should and should not be done. This is a crucial issue, because if adult family members are merely exercising their preferences for a certain number of children and a particular set of household working arrangements, then, in a liberal democratic state, it is difficult to justify state intervention intended to modify or change them. In this respect, the boundary between public and private life, which has been subject to considerable erosion and change, still holds. However, if people would like more children and wish that it could be made easier to have them, or if mothers would prefer to work more hours and would do so if only childcare were more available, accessible, affordable and of
good quality, then there is a clearer case for state intervention. But it is by no means easy to establish what the actual position is. Attitudes towards these central matters of family life – caregiving and doing paid work – vary between countries as well by region, age, ethnicity and gender. They can be contradictory, and are certainly hard to interpret.

Family changes have led to an appreciation of the family as an independent variable by both social policy analysts and policymakers (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Esping-Andersen et al., 2002), something that qualitative sociologists have argued for many years (for example Morgan, 1996). Family change has also changed the nature of risk and thus has the potential to create new demands for social welfare systems. Indeed, it has begun to be argued that family changes result in ‘new social risks’ (Bonoli, 2005; see also Taylor Gooby, 2004), which fall outside the established insurance-based frameworks for social protection, based as these have been on a stable, married, male breadwinner family, with a fully employed husband/father and primary carer wife/mother (Supiot, 2001; Lewis, 2001, 2002). The welfare systems based on social insurance for male breadwinners and their dependants that grew up in Western Europe during the twentieth century protected male workers against external risks; something like divorce was explicitly excluded from social insurance cover because it was impossible to exclude the possibility that either a husband or wife was ‘to blame’ for the event (Lewis, 2001a). In addition, care work was assumed to be the province of the wife and therefore not a primary issue for the state, although historically some countries did more in respect of the care of children, and others for elderly people.

Families have become dependent on two earners and labour markets have become more flexible, with short-term contracts and more precarious employment, particularly for women and particularly in Southern Europe, but also in France where such employment has increased, and among part-time workers in the UK. So leaving the labour market to have a child has become more risky, especially if there is no right to return to the same job and of substantial help with childcare. Policymakers want to promote labour market participation for all adults, male and female, and people may also respond to the new circumstances by wishing to secure their financial position as individuals. However, there is still, in all countries, a gender gap in how far they are able to do so.

WELFARE STATE CHANGE

The major changes in families and labour markets have coincided with a period of welfare state restructuring. The main feature of this has been an
effort to shift the emphasis from rights to responsibilities and from so-called ‘passive’ to ‘active’ welfare provision, such that claimants on the welfare system are ‘encouraged’ into work and work is made ‘to pay’ (Lødemel and Trickey, 2000). In the European context, welfare state change has been largely driven by the aim of promoting employment as a means of ensuring competitiveness and growth (CEC, 2000), and has been justified in terms of widening the tax base and thus also coming to the rescue of the continental European social insurance model (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002).

In the face of common economic and demographic challenges, European welfare states have sought to increase the proportion of adults active in the labour market and to expand the length of working life for men and women (Maier, 2007). Enabling transitions between employment and unemployment, and paid and unpaid work (Schmid, 1998; Gautié and Gazier, 2003) becomes crucial to this endeavour. Work–family policies are increasingly conceptualised in relation to the reform of welfare systems such that they encourage ‘flexibility’, rather than assuming the existence of ‘jobs for life’, and protect against a clearly defined range of mostly extra-familial risks. Since the late 1990s, policy at the European level has promoted ‘flexicurity’, that is, flexible labour markets in a framework of security that is in keeping with the idea of a European Social Model (CEC, 2006). Work–family balance policies are seen as having the double advantage of promoting both flexibility and security. In the Danish case, which epitomises changes in line with flexicurity, there are high employment rates of men and women, low protection against dismissal in the workplace, a high degree of flexible working with the possibility for the mothers of young children to reduce their hours, but also labour market activation policies to promote retraining and re-entry to employment, and highly developed support services such as childcare. Policy attention in respect of work and family balance policies has to date focused on the care of children, rather than dependent elderly people, in large part because the main goal has been to encourage employment among the mothers of dependent children. Thus despite ageing populations, relatively little attention has been paid to the care of elderly people, and even in some of the Scandinavian countries services for this group of the population have been cut. Indeed, the focus in regard to elderly people has also been on ‘active ageing’, defined as the need to keep people in employment for longer. However, as Jaumotte (2003) has suggested, policies that help women to reconcile work and family responsibilities are more politically acceptable than policies aimed at keeping older people in work for longer.

Thus the work–welfare relationship has been substantially recast (Pierson, 2001; Ferrera et al., 2000). Gilbert (2002) characterised the trends emerging at the turn of the century in terms of a series of shifts: from social
support to social inclusion via employment; from measures of ‘decommodification’ (that enable people to leave the labour market for due cause) to ways of securing commodification; and from unconditional benefits to benefits that are heavily conditional on work or training. Welfare states were built around the paid work–welfare relationship and the incentive and disincentive effects of social provision on the worker’s inclination to search for employment and to support himself and his family. Crucially, for the first time in the history of modern welfare states, the assumptions underpinning this recast work–welfare relationship have in the twenty-first century been increasingly extended to women as well as men (Lewis, 2002). The aim of higher employment rates for women is underpinned mainly by the economic calculation that more women in the labour market results in an increase in gross national product (GNP) through the introduction of new activities and through the recording of activities (such as informal childcare) that were hitherto unrecorded and protected from taxation and regulation (Boeri et al., 2005). Thus, the treatment of lone mothers has moved from policies based on assumptions a generation ago that their primary task is motherhood, to assumptions that they will increasingly be in the labour force (Kiernan et al., 1998). The Netherlands and the UK, like the US, signalled the shift in policy assumptions by applying limited welfare-to-work policies to this group from the mid- to late 1990s, and the trend has continued, with the Netherlands introducing a new part-time work obligation supplemented by means-tested benefits for lone mothers with children under 16 in 2007, and the UK government introducing a work obligation for lone mothers with children of over 12 years of age in 2008 with the intention of extending it to those with children over seven in 2010 (DWP, 2007). In the case of couple families, the decline of the male breadwinner model, the changing nature of risk, an increasing degree of economic independence for women, and the desire to modernise social protection systems to match the goal of a less standardised and more flexible working life has given rise to more discussion as to the desirability of more individually based ‘drawing rights’ in social security systems (Supiot, 2001), but without sufficient attention to gender inequalities.

The new principles underpinning social provision have neatly piggy-backed onto the erosion of the male breadwinner family. For the shift in ideas and practices in regard to social welfare systems is both instrumental, serving the competition and growth agenda of the European Commission and member states, and is also in keeping with ‘individualisation’. This is defined by social theorists as the processes whereby people’s lives come to be less constrained by tradition and custom and more subject to individual choice (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), but is usually understood at the policy level simply in terms of increasing economic
independence on the part of women. In this analysis, both the changes in the contributions that men and women make to households and the fluidity of family forms mean that there can be no firm normative assumptions regarding the ability of women and children to depend on a male breadwinner. It therefore becomes additionally convenient for policymakers to assume progress towards an ‘adult worker model’ family and increasingly to treat men and women the same: as fully individualised (Lewis, 2001).

However, there is a danger that the new set of assumptions about the desirability and inevitability of an adult worker model family is outrunning the social reality. This is chiefly because there are still profound gender divisions in both paid and unpaid work, albeit that these vary between countries and within countries, between regions, social classes and between people of different ethnicities (for example, in the UK, Asian women are much less likely to be in the labour force than white or black Afro-Caribbean women). Policymakers have been eager to encourage greater private responsibility for risk – especially in regard to provision for old age (Hacker, 2006, Taylor Gooby, 2004; Brush, 2002) – which again links to the emergence of an adult worker model family. But to assume the existence of this family model is no more accurate a description of the behavioural reality than was the idea of a male breadwinner model family in the early twentieth century. Women have always engaged in the labour market, but on different terms to men: they have lower pay rates, shorter working hours and periods of exit (foregoing earnings and often pension contributions), usually in order to do care work. Furthermore, the issue of care work in and for itself in terms of how to compensate it, how to organise it, and how to ensure greater equality between men and women, figures only rarely on the agendas of most governments.

The increased attention given to work and family balance policies has tended in most countries to be in the main about something else: primarily the need to promote employment, but also fertility and children’s early learning, again often as a means of making the necessary investment in human capital to secure future economic growth and competitiveness. However, the wide variety of goals for work and family balance policies are not necessarily compatible. For example, these policies are held to be good for business: by promoting working patterns that lead to reduced absence due to casual sickness; improving employee retention, productivity, morale and commitment; and by making it easier to manage a ‘diverse’ workforce – but this may mean that policies are less focused on social goals to do with prioritising family well-being (Perrons, 1999). Policies that are aimed at maximising mothers’ employment may work to the detriment of children’s welfare in the light of the evidence that exists to support the idea that very young children need a one-to-one relationship (Waldfogel, 2006).
may be difficulty in squaring the best interests of the very young child with support for parents’ choices, let alone with the interests of both fathers and mothers, or indeed of the broader economy and of business.

The impetus to move towards an adult worker model family has been strengthened by academic analysis of the need to ‘modernise’ social policies and by the prescriptions of transnational organisations, including the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has shown considerable interest in work and family policy in the 2000s, albeit that the prescriptions from different parts of that organisation have not always tallied (Mahon, 2006). The next section illustrates the way in which the development of work and family policies has been approached since the 1990s at the EU level. What happens at the EU level has been significant for those member states, like the UK, which had done relatively little in the work–family field until the late 1990s, but much less so in other countries, particularly in Scandinavia, where work–family balance policies were developed from the 1970s. The purpose of exploring the development of work and family policy at the EU level briefly here is that it provides a particularly clear-cut illustration of a shift away from work and family policies as part of an approach to equal opportunities, which have occupied a large place in EU policymaking, and towards a more instrumentalist, employment-driven approach that is more in line with wider welfare state restructuring.

ILLUSTRATING POLICY CHANGE: THE EU LEVEL

The implications of the shift to an adult worker model for policies to do with paid and unpaid work and for women in particular are clearly apparent at the EU level (Lewis, 2006a). In most countries, economic policy has tended to take priority over social policy. At the EU level, this has also been a function of the role of the Commission as above all a market-maker; social policies have developed as an adjunct to market-making. However, one of the few commitments to social policy at the time of the 1957 Treaty of Rome was to securing equal pay between men and women. While this was intended primarily to secure an even playing field between member states in respect of pay rates, it also provided a basis for building policy interventions in the work–family field.

Since the late 1990s, social policies have been promoted in terms of their potential to further both employment and economic goals, with employment policy seen as the pivotal point in this triangular relationship. As a result, social policy at the EU level has increasingly become ‘employment-led’ (O’Connor, 2005), and the focus on ‘market integration’ has tended
to confirm the subordination of social to economic policy (for example Hodson and Maher, 2001; Leibfried, 2005). Considerable concern has been expressed about the extent to which the European Social Model is equipped to promote rather than impede economic growth, the comparator being the better economic performance experienced in the US, at least prior to 2007/8 (CEC, 2004). It is possible to trace growing EU concern to push member states to address the problems of high levels of unemployment and relatively lower labour market participation rates – particularly among women – compared to the US, together with the accompanying perceived need to ‘modernise’ social protection systems in line with these challenges.

In a major social policy document issued in 2000, the European Commission defined social policy as ‘a productive factor’ and gave it a new role (CEC, 2000: 5). While in the past its task had been ‘minimising negative social consequences’, in the future its focus would be on ‘modernising the European social model and investing in people’ (CEC, 2000: 6). Employment policy became the major preoccupation of both social policy (in order to secure the viability of the work–welfare relationship) and economic policy (in order to promote competition and growth). Particular attention was paid to women’s employment rates in the context of the European Employment Strategy (EES); in 2000 the Lisbon Council set a target of 60 per cent for female labour market participation in member states by 2010 (CEU, 2000), albeit without any specification as to the number of hours to be worked. Indeed, as early as 1993, the European Commission identified the formal care sector as a source of new jobs (CEC, 1993), the implication being that women workers might trade the work of informal care for paid work in the formal care sector. As the High Level Group reviewing the Lisbon Strategy put it, the aim has been to ‘embed’ Europe’s commitment to social cohesion ‘in the core of the growth and jobs generation process’ (High Level Group, 2004: 16).

It is instructive to see how the approach to work and family policies has shifted in relation to the determination to modernise social policy and to make it ‘fit for purpose’ in terms of supporting the core goals of economic growth and competitiveness and, more recently, higher fertility rates. It is possible to see a shift: first, from concern with equal opportunities between men and women, towards a greater preoccupation with opportunities for mothers to engage in paid work; and second, regarding the choice of policy instruments away from parental leave, which enables labour market exit (usually by women), towards more concern about the provision of childcare services, which would seem to promote labour market attachment (although, as Chapter 3 shows, these commonly understood outcomes are not as clear-cut as might be supposed). Since the late 1990s, work and family policies have been conceptualised in relation to the goal
of increasing women’s employment rates, and since 2005 additionally in relation to the goal of increasing fertility in the face of population ageing. Indeed, by the late 2000s, these policies were increasingly understood not just in terms of underpinning the crucial employment strategy within the social policy, economic policy and employment triangle, but as: first, part of a new more highly specified ‘flexicurity’ strategy that linked ‘modernised social policies’ – mainly in the form of active labour market policies in preference to employment protection – firmly to the promotion of flexible labour markets; and second, as the link between economic and demographic policies. To this extent, work–family policies have become more visible, both at EU and member state levels.

Work–family reconciliation policies were explicitly addressed from the early 1990s. Most of the key documents issued on the subject during the early and mid-1990s made reference somewhere, if only in passing, to the desirability of men and women sharing employment and family responsibilities. In 1992, a European Council recommendation was issued on childcare and recommended that member states develop and/or encourage initiatives to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and child-raising responsibilities (CEU, 1992). The recommendation also defined childcare broadly and proposed that measures were needed in four areas: childcare services, leave for employed parents, family-friendly policies at the workplace, and measures to promote the increased participation by men in the care and upbringing of children. It thus covered all the main dimensions of work and family balance policies under the heading of ‘childcare’ and also addressed the role of men and fathers. Even the 1994 White Paper on Social Policy, which provided an early endorsement of the need for higher ‘adult’ labour market participation, referred to the need for ‘greater solidarity between men and women’ at the same time as it prioritised the role of social policies in promoting women’s employment (CEC, 1994: 43).

In 1996 a directive on parental leave (CEU, 1996) was adopted, which laid down minimum individual rights to three months parental leave for men and women. Member states were left to determine the conditions of access, whether the leave should be compensated and whether it should be full- or part-time. The leave was to be non-transferable – fathers could not transfer it to mothers – in order to promote gender equality. However, the fact that no minimum remuneration requirements were specified (a victory for the employer’s side) made it much less likely that men would take it (as proved to be the case; Bruning and Plantenga, 1999), and that it would in practice be reconciliation for women (see Chapter 3).

Since the late 1990s, there has been a significant change in the way in which work–family reconciliation policies have been talked about.
As the then Social Affairs Commissioner Padraig Flynn, commented in his foreword to the Employment and Social Affairs Directorate’s 1998 report on reconciliation, the issue ‘is an integral part of the European Employment Strategy process’ (CEC, 1998). From 1998, work–family reconciliation has been more firmly integrated into the guidelines accompanying the European Employment Strategy. The result has been: first, that the goal of promoting gender equality by changing the behaviour of men has tended to slip out of the picture; and second, that the policy focus has narrowed substantially to the provision of childcare services, which are often considered to be more likely to promote female employment than measures that provide time to care, particularly long childcare leaves. Following the Lisbon targets for women’s employment, the 2002 Barcelona Council set targets for the provision of childcare services to reach 90 per cent of children between three and school age, and 33 per cent of under-three’s.

By the early 2000s, arguments for the need to reform ‘work organisation’ by increasing flexibility, in which the provision of childcare was recognised to play a part, were made without any reference to equal opportunities (for example CEC, 1997; Webster, 2001). This signalled the extent to which work–family reconciliation had become increasingly tied to the new flexicurity agenda, and to be conceptualised as an important component of the commitment to enhancing flexibility by, for example, encouraging part-time work in order to increase the mothers’ employment rates, but also to the goal of promoting ‘social quality’ at work (CEC, 2001). Work–family balance policies were conceptualised as increasing the attractiveness of work, but there was insufficient attention paid both to guaranteeing the conditions of such work (which often remained precarious despite the 1997 Part-Time Work Directive 97/81 designed to improve its quality) and to issues to do with unpaid care work. In 2003, work–family reconciliation was included under the ‘quality and productivity’ objective in the EES Guidelines (CEU, 2003), the equal opportunities pillar, under which it had appeared from 1998 (CEU, 1998), having been abolished as gender equality became a ‘horizontal principle’ to be mainstreamed across all policy fields. There was as a result rather less mention of gender equality, which in the sense of ‘equal sharing’ of paid and unpaid work between men and women was given reduced priority (Rubery et al., 2003).

However, the European Commission has long recognised that ‘the new gender balance in working life [meaning women’s entry into paid work] is at odds with traditional family policies’, and reform was viewed as a necessary part of the modernisation of social protection (CEC, 1997a). Esping-Andersen, who co-authored an influential policy document for
the Belgian Presidency in 2001, went further in his indictment of the ‘familialism’ of the old welfare settlement, arguing that policies based on assumptions regarding the traditional roles of men and women in families and the male breadwinner model family had become the ‘Achilles heel’ of welfare states, running counter to both family formation and labour supply (Esping-Andersen, 1999: 70). Work–family reconciliation policies have long been a part of the EU’s mainstream concern about economic policy and access to labour markets. But in the early and mid-1990s they were clearly nested within equal opportunities policies as well as employment policies. They have increasingly been absorbed into employment policy, and the approach to them has been above all instrumental, linked to strategies to raise women’s employment rates and to policies to promote adequate security for workers in post-industrial, flexible labour markets. A 2006 Commission consultation document on extending EU legislation on childcare leaves, services and working time reiterated: ‘the need for a better work–private life balance in order to achieve economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness’ (CEC, 2006a: Introduction).

With the adoption of the strategy of flexicurity, work–family policies have been seen as a component of both employment policies and of a modernised social security system. But this has proved a difficult balancing act for policymakers, and in 2007 the Commission warned – albeit in a document on gender equality rather than on the mainstream policy issue of flexicurity – that flexicurity policies ‘should avoid stressing the “flexibility” aspect for women [mainly in the form of reduced working hours and short or fixed-term contracts] and the “security” aspect for men’ (CEC, 2007b: para. 3.1). Nevertheless, a few months later it was still possible for the European Expert Group on Flexicurity (2007) to issue a document on ‘flexicurity pathways’ with no reference to gender equality issues. Even in Denmark there is evidence to show that men have enjoyed better access to active labour market policies – a crucial dimension of the flexicurity strategy – than women (Hansen, 2007).

By the mid-2000s, the issue of fertility was also being joined to that of employment, with the High Level Group on the Future of Social Policy in an Enlarged European Union (2004) promoting work–family reconciliation additionally as a means of allowing couples ‘to have the number of children they desire’ (see also CEC, 2006b). In this context, work and family policies were again linked more explicitly to gender equality and also to the promotion of solidarity between the generations, as it was recognised that caring responsibilities were increasingly borne by the young and intermediate generations, and mainly by women (CEC, 2007a,c). In 2006 both the European Council and the Commission advocated measures to promote the use of parental leave by men (CEU, 2006; CEC, 2006c), and
the Commission launched a consultation process with the social partners on how to improve reconciliation policies (CEC, 2006a, 2007a). But in the main, EU-level policy has focused much more attention on the need for reconciliation policies for women – harnessing them to employment policy and making them a measure of social quality – than for men.

GENDER EQUALITY

Gendered patterns of paid and unpaid work are fundamental to the problem of gender inequality. But the term ‘work–family balance’ has not passed without criticism. First, academic commentators working mainly on what happens at the level of the firm and particularly on flexible working have long used the term ‘work–life balance’ (for example Rapoport et al., 2002; Gambles et al., 2006). This is generalisable to all workers and may therefore be considered by employers to be less divisive, in addition to serving the wider workplace agenda of how to manage an increasingly diverse workforce. Thus, work–life balance, which has also penetrated government documents in the UK and at the EU level, goes beyond the need to address the gendered issue of paid and unpaid work. Many, including trade unionists as well as managers, think that a wider focus will also benefit the pursuit of gender equality; others fear that it will dilute it (see Chapters 3 and 5). Rapoport et al. (2002) have advocated the use of the term ‘work–personal life integration’, which they suggest will address a dual policy agenda of improving workplace performance and pursuing gender equality (see also Thomas, 1990; Guest, 2001). Second, as in this last example, the idea of ‘balance’ has also been questioned. Gambles et al. (2006) have suggested that balance implies a trade-off: as one element goes up the other goes down (see also Jones et al., 2006). Better, it is argued, to call for the ‘harmonisation’ of paid work with other parts of ‘life’ (Gambles et al., 2006). However, from the point of view of research in the work and family field, Crompton and Brockman (2006) have suggested that the notion of work–life ‘articulation’ is a more neutral and more appropriate focus than the idea of balance as a means to achieving and harmonious accommodation.

Nevertheless, in respect of the territory of paid and unpaid work, parents as well as policymakers regularly speak about employment and childcare issues in terms of ‘juggling’ and ‘balancing’. From a gender perspective, it makes more sense to talk about work–family balance policies, than work–life policies, which take in the issue of leisure as well as care, and which may apply to all workers rather than being focused on the issue of combining paid and unpaid work.
Whether and how gender issues warrant explicit consideration by policymakers has proved problematic in most EU member states. In any case, there is a big debate about what might constitute gender equality in relation to such policies. Gender equality has often been defined by academics chiefly in relation to women’s opportunities in the labour market (for example Korpi, 2000) as well as by policymakers. If this definition is adopted, certain policy prescriptions follow, and are likely to give priority to measures that encourage female access to employment. To go further and to ensure equal treatment in the labour market would, of course, require much more political will to implement a wide range of policies on pay and conditions, and on workplace discrimination.

But gender inequality is also present in the division of unpaid work. Given that the unpaid work of care is necessary to the well-being of society, other analysts have asked whether there should not also be a right to give and to receive care for men and women (Knijn and Kremer, 1997), which in turn raises issues to do with how care is rewarded in the formal and informal sectors and how it is shared between men and women at the household level, as well as between the individual and the state. There is tension between policymakers’ desire to promote female labour market participation and the continued expectation on the part of most governments (and people) that it will be women who will continue to take primary responsibility for care work. Indeed, family policies are often about competition between different values and their incorporation into policies (Strohmeier, 2002), probably to a greater extent than in other policy fields. For example, Hertz (1999) has noted the extent to which the whole idea of balancing work and family may be a euphemism for competing ideologies about child-rearing. Using cross-national evidence, Kremer (2007) has also stressed the importance of the way in which different ideals of childcare (for example professional care, surrogate mothering or parental sharing) prevail at different times in different countries and influence policymaking.

Most Western and Northern European welfare states rely on ideas about what constitutes best practice in terms of caring for children. Usually, some form of leave (taken mainly by mothers) will cover the child’s early years, followed by the provision of childcare services. The Scandinavian countries introduced ‘daddy quotas’, whereby men are obliged to take some parental leave or lose it altogether. This avoids compulsion, while encouraging men to do unpaid work. However, even in these countries, where work–family balance policies are most developed and gender equality has been explicitly promoted, it is more accurate to describe policy as supporting a ‘gender participation model’ (Hobson, 2004) – that is, enabling women to enter the labour market and to leave it
'for cause' (namely, to care) – rather than enabling women and men to be able to make a real choice to engage in paid and/or unpaid work. In these countries, as at the EU level, work–family balance policies largely have been, and remain, policies to ease the burden on women who undertake paid and unpaid work.

All this raises issues about how gender difference and gender equality matter for policy. Some feminist commentators have pointed out that because social policies of all kinds increasingly assume the existence of an individualised, adult worker model family, priority needs to be given to policies that promote women’s equality in the workforce (for example Orloff, 2009). Indeed, many feminists have long argued in favour of women’s financial autonomy as a crucial means to equality (Orloff, 1993), which involves considerably more than mere access to the labour market. But if women report that they want to do care work, should this not be respected? Even when academic writers eschew comment on what might be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for women, they nevertheless tend to reflect deep-seated and very different national traditions as to what constitutes gender equality. Thus Trzinski (2000) has called attention to the continued strength of a ‘maternalist’ tradition in Germany. The danger at the policy level is that a decision to opt for care work is treated as private, and that society fails to compensate fully or otherwise accommodate it. Women who express a preference for the informal work of care may be expressing ideas about their own identities: as mothers rather than workers (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000); about what they consider ‘the proper thing to do’ (Finch and Mason, 1993), in which case their behaviour probably has much to do with normative expectations which may also be influenced by economic pressures; or about their assessment of what their options are. For example, a choice to do care work may be influenced by a belief based on historical reality that childcare provision in their neighbourhood is either too expensive or of insufficiently high quality. Cultural differences between countries, social classes and ethnicities are likely to be important in all this (Pfau-Effinger, 1998).

But it remains a problem as to whether women in particular should be ‘allowed’ to make the choice to do care work rather than paid work if it disadvantages them. For example, mothers may choose to stay at home to care for children without realising that this will impose costs in terms of their career advancement and pension entitlements. Should government merely applaud such altruism (which may not be fully understood by mothers themselves), seek to inform the choice, or compensate mothers for it? It is surely dishonourable to do the first without attempting either the second or third of these. In addition, what should be done about the fact that men’s choice not to care constrains women’s choice to work? It may
be, as Bianchi and Casper (2004) have suggested, that further enlargement of choices for women depends on men changing their behaviour, and in particular on changes to the male career norm.

The goals of governments in promoting work–family balance are diverse, but gender equality in and for itself is rarely a priority outside Scandinavia, and even those countries are not immune from debate about what constitutes gender equality and what constitutes ‘choice’. In the UK, gender equality has hardly been discussed; rather, policy documents have striven for gender neutrality. But it is very difficult to define gender equality in the context of work–family balance policies. The age-old problem of equality-as-sameness or equality-as-difference (Lister, 1997) is central to this problem. If the aim is sameness, in the context of work–family balance this translates into an equal division of paid and unpaid work between men and women: a citizen worker/carer model. This has been espoused by Fraser (1997) on the basis of philosophical argument, and by Gornick and Meyers (2003) as a result of their empirical research. But if equality consists of recognising difference or diversity, then policy may seek to reward women’s disproportionate amount of care work, albeit at the risk of perpetuating this work as women’s responsibility. If some form of gender equity rather than equality has been reached, then this second option may appear to be legitimate. In the UK, for example, total work hours, paid and unpaid, are similar for men and women, but men work long hours and do less unpaid work, while women work part-time hours and do more unpaid work. However, there is still the problem that care work materially disadvantages those who choose to do it in Western societies, even when it is compensated, as the relative rates of poverty for men and women testify. Whether it takes place in the formal or informal sectors, care work is poorly rewarded financially. This is a problem that is likely to increase in significance as governments seek to make people more responsible for their own welfare, especially in old age, and to privatise risk.

While the goal of a citizen worker/carer model is very attractive for those, myself included, anxious to see more progress towards gender equality, the difficulty of disentangling gender equality and gender equity, and of accommodating very different ideas about what adult men and women should contribute to families, particularly in increasingly pluralist societies, has meant that a different approach to defining gender equality has been used in this book. It focuses not on equality of outcome, but rather on the importance of agency and the possibilities different policies and policy packages hold for permitting a ‘real choice’. Derived from the work of Sen (1999) on capabilities, it is an approach that eschews prescription and instrumentalism, and permits the reframing of the
current policy debates over the nature of choice – for whom and about what – that have become increasingly dominant in a number of member states, including Scandinavia (Ellingsaeter and Leira, 2006). The idea of ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ choice goes beyond choice as a simple expression of preferences and acknowledges the important role of policy in addressing the constraints on choice. If care is a universal human need (Nussbaum, 1999), then arguably it should be possible for anyone to choose to do it (Lewis and Giuliani, 2005). Truly genuine choice can only exist in a perfect universe of fair and adequate wages, generous family policies, and secure work and family situations. However, it is employed here to indicate a possible policy direction that is oriented towards equal opportunities and which eschews a wholly instrumental approach. This does not constitute a rejection of the desirability of a universal worker/carer model, which it is assumed will produce less of a double burden for working mothers, more egalitarian family and gender relations, and a reduction in women’s poverty. But the main concern of this book is with the patterning of policy packages and with policy trajectories, rather than policy outcomes, and a major task will be to explore the definitions of gender equality used by policymakers, and the meanings of choice that have increasingly been used in various countries in relation to gender neutrality and gender equality.

Defining gender equality in terms of real choice for the purposes of the analysis cuts the Gordian knot of equality versus difference and provides a yardstick for reaching conclusions about policy trajectories. From this definition, it follows that work–family balance policies must address a wide range of concerns and focus on both unpaid and paid work. Thus policies must deal with: both working time and time to care; the cash transfers needed either to buy care in order to enter the labour market, or to buy the time to exit the labour market to care; and the provision of care services. Time – and indeed the gendered politics of time, at the household as well as the societal level (Baldock and Hadlow, 2004) – is as important as money (at least in the richer Western and Northern European member states), and the interaction between the different components of policy packages in this respect is difficult to gauge. Neither care services nor parental leave alone is sufficient to secure ‘real choice’. Indeed, the nature of the policy package is crucial in terms of the range of policies it offers and the fine-tuning of each policy in the package (for example in respect of eligibility, compensation rate and duration). Working time also involves employers and what happens at the level of the firm. As the OECD (2001) reported, in countries with good state provision on work–family balance, some firms did little, but where the state did nothing, firms failed to fill the gap (see also Evans, 2002). Long working hours, or inflexible working hours set in
the interests of the employer rather than the employee, run counter to a real choice to care.

THE BOOK

The main purpose of this book is to understand the nature of the work and family balance policy packages that have developed in different countries, together with their implications for the pursuit of gender equality. These packages have addressed the care of children, which is also the focus of this book. Several commentators have argued that care for the old and for children should be considered together (Anttonen and Sipilä, 1996; Leitner, 2003; Anttonen et al., 2007). In terms of the impact of care work at the household level, and in terms of debates about the future of policy, this is an important point, even though it is crucial to delineate carefully the very real differences in the nature of care work for the old and the young. However, policymakers have tended to treat elder care and childcare separately, in terms of policy approaches and mechanisms. This book is confined to looking across the range of policies dealing with children.

The first part is broadly comparative, focusing mainly on the EU15 member states with reference to the US. It reviews the context for the development of work and family policy, first in terms of labour market behaviour and family formation at the aggregate level and at the level of the household, and in relation to people’s attitudes and preferences. Crompton et al. (2007) have sought to understand the way in which work and family responsibilities are ‘articulated’ by situating them in their economic and policy context, ‘filtered’ by varying norms and values. Equally, context matters when the focus is on policy rather than behaviour. For example, similar labour activation policies in Denmark and in the UK look very different in practice because they have been inserted into different institutional arrangements. Neyer (2006) has also shown the extent to which similar family policies are likely to have different effects in different contexts.

As Chapter 2 shows, context also matters for policy formation, although exactly how is a matter of debate; it is remarkably difficult to establish clear causal relationships. Thus, while most commentators are agreed that there are external challenges to welfare states, above all in the form of globalisation, it has not proved easy to find any clear-cut pattern of responses, and a strong strand in the literature argues that domestic challenges have been more important in provoking reform (Pierson, 2001; Timonen, 2003). The changes in the contributions men and women make to families, which revolve largely around changes in labour market participation
(especially of women), together with the changes in family form, which are crucial to demographic change, are key dimensions of these domestic challenges. A review of these changes shows how much of a gap exists in different countries between assumptions regarding progress towards the individualised adult work model family and higher fertility rates endorsed by policymakers on the one hand, and the social reality on the other. In addition, policymakers face difficulties in understanding the relationship between these factors and people’s attitudes and preferences, which cannot be ignored in liberal democratic states. Recent case studies of childcare have made a convincing argument that there is an iterative relationship between attitudes and behaviour, and that policies can help to change both (Himmelweit, 2005; also Kremer, 2007). Policy may seek deliberately and radically to change attitudes and behaviour, or to instigate only moderate reform while nevertheless initiating change.

Much depends on how the nature of the challenges is interpreted. Feminist analysts have consistently argued that the way in which policies are represented is underpinned by normative assumptions regarding the gender order and gender differences (for example Lewis, 1992; Mazey, 2000; Bacchi, 2004). The existing gendered patterns of work and care bear testimony to the fact that the countries of Western Europe started the twenty-first century in different places in terms of patterns of female labour market participation and attitudes towards whether mothers should work, as well as in regard to policies (as Chapters 3 and 4 show). There seems to have been substantial convergence between countries in the 2000s in terms of the overarching instrumental policy goal of work–family balance policies as a means to promoting women’s employment, and in many countries as a means to achieving higher fertility rates. But there remains ample space for differences between countries in terms of the attention paid to other policy goals: for example the desire to promote children’s cognitive development; the balance between policies in the total policy package; and the policy instruments that are actually used.

Influential work by political scientists on policy development has stressed the importance of ‘path-dependence’ and the tendency to continuity rather than change (Pierson, 1994; but also Crouch and Farrell, 2004). But the work and family policy field has been marked by change in the sense of both reform to existing policy instruments and the introduction of new instruments, rather than continuity. Policy development in this field has amounted to more than the kind of change at the margins that is often directed towards patching up existing arrangements, but which may in the end result in significant reform (Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Clegg, 2007). Nevertheless, the fact that policymakers do not start with a blank slate is important to an understanding of the different policy priorities, packages
and trajectories. Sociologists have also recognised the importance of societal effects deriving from the policy orientations of major interest groups (Gallie, 2003). Thus, for example, in the Scandinavian countries the pursuit of gender equality has become normative, while in the English-speaking countries the historical strength of the public–private boundary has to be negotiated by a government wishing to intervene in the work and family field. The first section of the book cannot explore in any depth the part played by the policy actors and institutions in different countries (this is attempted only for the UK in Part II). Rather, it focuses particularly on coming to some understanding of the nature of the ideas and rhetoric that are used to make the case for policy development and/or change (Schmidt, 2001, 2002; Campbell, 2002) and their relationship to policy instruments, which is explored for four countries in more depth in Chapter 4.

The second part of the book focuses on the UK and on the policy goals, instruments and politics of policymaking since the late 1990s, tracing policy development in the three main areas of flexible working time, leaves and childcare services. The UK is an oddity in Western Europe in that it started in 1997 with close to a blank slate in terms of explicit work and family policies. Chapter 5 first elaborates labour market behaviour and what we know about attitudes towards work and family responsibilities in the UK, and then examines the nature of provision, looking at the way in which policies have been framed, the interests of other policy actors, particularly employers, and what has been achieved. The UK case is a good example of profound continuity as well as change. The conclusion returns to the issue of gender equality: what has been achieved and what needs to be done. Work–family balance policies have a number of objectives and have been pursued using a variety of policy instruments. The balance between instruments differs within and between countries in line with the priority accorded different goals, with the result that there have also been welfare trade-offs between adults (particularly mothers) and children, and between men and women.

NOTE

1. Of course, as Brody (1981) recognised more than quarter of a century ago, ‘women in the middle’ – in their fifties and sometimes in their forties – may be called upon to care for older dependent children and elderly parents.