

## Preface

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Addressing the problems associated with organising the effective care of children is of major importance for the children themselves, their parents and society at large. The children do not get a say in the arrangements but the decisions taken relating to who looks after them and how they are looked after will have a major impact on their formation and their subsequent lives. While simply having the child in the first place is a major decision, organising its care can be traumatic and lead to the break-up of the family rather than to its most important development. The problem is that the tradeoffs that have to be made in the face of limited resources are difficult and often unsatisfactory. The mother has to consider not just the baby's needs but also her own career. The family has to decide the balance between income, employment and care. Taking leave from work or changing a job to make it more convenient can have an impact that lasts for the whole of a person's life and often cannot be renegotiated when a bad decision has been made.

In this book we explore these issues not so much from the point of view of offering solutions but to make sure that the problems are clear and that they can be addressed. Our focus is on Europe. One of the great advantages of the process of closer integration among European countries is that they make a conscious effort to try to learn from each other, hence allowing policy to develop faster than is normally the case, where to some extent each society has to make its own mistakes before it can progress. In the field of social welfare the responsibility is primarily national except in so far as national authorities choose to delegate it. However, the EU applies the open method of coordination in this field, encouraging the setting of targets, the mutual assessment of policy and the close exchange of ideas and experience. In so far as activities in one country impinge across borders then minimum standards are set.

In the present instance there are three major concerns in this regard. The first is for those who move across borders. With national welfare regimes it is difficult to take benefit entitlement with you. In particular when families move, even within a country, they lose much of their social capital, which is essential to effective management of childcare and this has to be replaced. The second is that the decisions taken may affect the competitiveness of the

countries involved and the development of the quality of life of both the children and parents. The third and most difficult is that the better systems tend to be associated with higher living standards hence reinforcing both advantage and disadvantage. Compared to federal states, the EU does far less to address inequalities.

Our purpose in this book is to deal with solutions to two juggling acts. The first is simply to look at the lessons that can be learnt from trying to balance income, work and inclusion in society in the context of bearing and raising children. We are specifically concerned that the impact is highly gender based. Many solutions are clearly detrimental to the career of women. This does not of itself reduce welfare but it is an inequality and one that needs to be dealt with *ex ante*. It is not that the observed proportions of women 'sacrificing' their career in order to raise children that should change. Maybe it should but *ex ante* parents should be able to take a decision where they can balance up the various pros and cons and come to a conclusion that is neither entirely dictated by circumstances nor clearly discriminates against one partner rather than another purely because of the constraints.

The chapters tackle the problems from a variety of directions and experience. But what differentiates the present study from the many others in the field is a concern with the interaction with democracy. Membership of the EU offers a new level at which the problems can be addressed and new ways in which they might be considered. The extent of political union in the EU is clearly limited but in this study we consider how much a closer union might contribute to addressing the problems of childcare, given how important income levels are in determining the scope for making decisions. However, EU decisions are primarily made at the national level and problems with the euro area may reinforce this. Hence a second concern is over how the nation states might address the problems separately and in particular what those who are currently experiencing extreme fiscal distress might be able to achieve now and in the future.

Lastly, the question of how to handle childcare demands is dealt with primarily at a very localised level – among the family, the wider family, the community and the workplace. This implies a much more complex process of development and achievement of the gender balance and freedom of choice that we mention. Individuals and civil society are involved just as much as the traditional decision makers within the firm, the community and the country. Addressing that mix flexibly will do much to help achieve welfare enhancing outcomes from the resources available. Understanding the problem and its possible solutions better may actually lead to more resources being devoted to the problem. Making that sort of decision and its impact on distribution of private and public expenditure across individuals and across

time is fundamental to both equality and democracy. We hope that this book at least makes a difference.