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Family Policies in France: between generosity and ambiguity

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CENTRAL THEME

The second MOCHO meeting, Amsterdam, 24th of May, 2002

The second MOCHO meeting in Amsterdam was a huge success. After a heavy morning session where all practical arrangements as to our future work were made, we spent the afternoon listening to the different teams' presentations on a variety of topics of the utmost interest to our MOCHO project. Below, we have assembled the summaries of some of the presentations. Firstly, there is the presentation of H el ene P erivier from our French team on the extent to which family policies accommodate female employment in France. Secondly, there is S ile O'Dorchai from the Belgian team's presentation on the three clusters of welfare state comparisons in which she first brought together some very interesting existing typologies together and then tried to identify how they are distinguished from one another. Thirdly, Daniela Del Boca of the University of Turin and CHILD analysed the effect of child care system characteristics on women's labour supply decisions in the particular situation of Italy. Fourthly, the presentation of Marilena Locatelli and Ugo Colombino is a model that allows the evaluation of household' welfare that follows the introduction of a fiscal decentralisation system, or subsidies given to the families, or a change in public services supplied by municipalities. A fifth contribution was made by Daniela Vuri. She analysed the "breakdown of the traditional family" that has attracted much concern particularly because of its perceived negative implication for children. Following Daniela Vuri's article, you will find a summary of Spyridon Tryfonas' presentation on behalf of the Greek team. He enlightened the question of how motherhood affects time allocation. Finally, C ecile Wetzels from the Dutch team shared some of the results of a very recent study of hers on the topic of Dutch women's efforts on the labour market. She tried to answer the following question: Is there a double selection into motherhood and type of jobs?

Family Policies and Female Employment in France : between generosity and ambiguity

H EL ENE P ERIVIER

French mothers achievements...

The trend of female employment in France is original in comparison with the other European countries. Although French women have more children than their European sister members they are massively present on the labour market. As Jeanne Fagnani (2001) emphasises it, this paradox changes the general idea about the negative impact of female activity on fertility.

Editorial board

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How to explain this phenomenon?

The generous family policies that have been implemented in France for 30 years are probably one of the main explanations of this evolution. Since 1968 French women have had a stronger bargaining power to make public policies become more friendly to the “mother at work pattern”. The causal relation is not that clear though: is it because French women used to fight more that they have obtained these favourable family policies or is it thanks to these policies that they have managed to reach their present position on the labour market? It is difficult to answer to this question. Nevertheless the wide public policy for families has obviously had a strong effect on female employment growth in France.

Can we consider France as the “working women’s heaven”?

Not really, some disparities and inequities are hidden behind this positive general situation. The strongest result is that it is easier to reconcile professional and family life for those women who are more skilled and have a more secure position on the labour market. Just as a remark it is striking to see that this theme of the reconciliation between work and family is still and again posed in terms of a purely feminine choice without taking into account that men are a part of the family too! But let’s focus on the characteristics and problems of the French family policies and their effects on female labour behaviour.

The main aim of French family policy is no longer fertility but it is to cover the cost of children in order to guarantee the

standard of living of families that have children relative to those without children. The “*Allocations familiales*” (Family Allowances) firstly implemented to stimulate fertility, are now more focused on a horizontal equity objective (even if they are still not available for the first child, who is thus costly for parents anyway). They are given to all parents with more than 2 children whatever their level of income. One of the most important costs induced by children is childcare. Childcare support can take two different forms. The first one is to offer some solutions either in covering the cost of childcare or in proposing public facilities (Crèches, day nurseries...). The second one is to use the employment policy in order to fit the time of work with the family constraints. The mix of employment objectives and family support can have perverse effects on mothers’ employment as we will see later.

Is the French system generous for every family?

The French system is fairly generous. Globally family policy represents 3% of GDP. It is just behind the Nordic countries. The development of childcare supports has been concentrated on individual childcare systems at the expense of collective facilities. The growth rate of the number of places in crèches has kept slowing down during the 80’s. It has fallen from above 72% at the end of the 70’s to 5 % in 1990. Crèches and day nurseries were accused to be a too rigid solution that could not appropriately meet parents’ demand. The French government has reduced

public investments for childcare and promoted individual childcare supports. This trend has created two kinds of inequalities. The first one is a geographical inequality related to the access to childcare facilities : as public investments are mainly decided at the local level, only the big towns can afford these expenses. There is then a gap between equipment in the urban areas and in the country. Individual supports, that have been strongly developed, are mainly offered through tax advantages and cash transfers for people who employ a childminder at home or outside. So only families who are rich enough to afford these kinds of childcare means and whose income is high enough to be taxable are concerned. Then it creates a social inequality because the poorest families do not have access to these kinds of supports.

Between good intention and way out....

The government can also mix the aims of employment policy and family policy. This double objective might have perverse effects. During periods with a high level of unemployment, like the 80’s and the beginning of the 90’s, the temptation is considerable for governments to use a family objective in order to lure women into home and then reduce the unemployment rate. The *Allocation Parentale d’Education* (Education Allowance for Parents) illustrates this point of view. It has been created in the mid 80’s to help parents with three children to mind: the parent who stopped working in order to mind for the third child was given a monthly allowance until the youngest child

reached three years of age. Most of the time the mother was the parent who interrupted or definitely stopped her career after the birth of the third child. Even without any allowances the third child used to induce the withdrawal of mothers from the labour market. The first version of this measure did not have a strong effect in terms of modification of female labour behaviour.

But in 1994, the French government extended this policy in two manners. The first one is the possibility to take up the allowance at a partial rate and then keep working at part time. This point of the reform has actually made parents' life easier. 20% of the beneficiaries of the APE are at partial rate. The second extension was to offer the APE from the second child onwards. The incentive effect for mothers to interrupt their career was then massive and it has had a stronger effect than expected. About 110 000 mothers have withdrawn from the labour market in order to take care of their second child at full time. We notice that less than 2% of the beneficiaries are men. At first glance this measure appears to be an efficient way to help parents with two children. Even if we do not talk about the negative impact for women's career to stop working during three years (in terms of promotion and so on) it has been dramatic for women who did not have a secure enough job they could go back to for sure after the APE period.

So what has happened for unskilled mothers?

All women who were at the fringe of the labour market before taking up the

allowance, whose job was a precarious one, were then stuck in a inactivity trap without possibility to get back by themselves onto the labour market. In this view the full rate APE can be considered as a kind of mother's wage but only a temporary one! The APE has had a positive effect for most women, who have taken it up at partial rate or who have chosen the full rate but have a secure job. Usually these women are skilled. But it has had a strong perverse effect in evicting from the labour market women who were generally unskilled. After the three years of right to the APE, these women are generally not able to find a job because of their lack of training and their too long inactivity period. In conclusion, it has encouraged unskilled women to go back home. It has strengthened the disparity and the inequality that were already strong between skilled and unskilled women.

How to improve the situation?

There are two main possibilities for the French government to fight this precariousness of unskilled women: either going the whole way in offering a genuine mother's wage that will insure a kind of financial security and independence. But this solution means a strong flashback for women's rights and their social independence. A second solution is more compatible with this objective and consists in offering training during the receiving period or to encourage the partial rate take up of the allowance.

In conclusion, French family policies in general are generous and diversified. They have assisted female employment development thanks to different

measures that have made it easier for women to take care of their children and to work at the same time. But as we have shown there is still a lot to do :

- ✓ in terms of public investment to increase massively the numbers of places in crèches and day nurseries;
- ✓ in terms of fittings of specific measures in order to suppress the inactivity trap of unskilled women;
- ✓ in terms of encouragement and incentives for fathers to be more involved in family life and try to generalise this question to both parents and not only to mothers.

Welfare State Comparisons

SÍLE O'DORCHAI

Introduction

In recent years, a great number of researchers have established different typologies of welfare states. Many have evaluated welfare states using different criteria, starting out from different angles and weighing differently separate features of welfare states. This article sheds light on the different existing typologies of welfare states and how they differ in methodology and results. The main finding is that typologies differ only slightly no matter which methodology the researcher used or which features his attention was concentrated upon.

The first cluster of welfare state typologies