

**Work-Life Balance: Demographics, Care Work and
Care Infrastructure**
**Report on a SAAGE Initiative Seminar held in Brussels on
Friday 18th May 2018**



This report was financed by, and prepared for the use of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, Unit D2 'Equality between men and women', in the framework of a contract managed by Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini (FGB). It does not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the European Commission or of the Directorate-General for Justice, nor may any person acting on their behalf be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.



Background

The seminar aimed to deepen the knowledge and understanding among relevant European Commission officials of changing demographics, the demands of care work, and the care infrastructure required to achieve work-life balance. Specifically, it focused on demographic choices, in particular spacing of births within families, and on the mix and sharing of paid and unpaid work during the life cycle.

The seminar was organised by the Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini (FGB) and the European Commission (EC) as part of the Scientific Analysis and Advice on Gender Equality (SAAGE) initiative. The agenda and contents, venue and timing were agreed beforehand between EC and FGB. The seminar was facilitated by Niall Crowley.

Opening

Greet Vermeylen, Gender Equality, DG Justice and Consumers, opened the seminar. She introduced the Work Life Balance Package and its focus on leave arrangements for women and men, effective dismissal protection, and care infrastructure for children and older people. She pointed to a forthcoming Eurobarometer on attitudes in the workplace to men and women taking up leave and opened up the issue of unpaid work and the importance of time-use surveys in tracking this.

Fabian Luetz, Gender Equality in DG Justice and Consumers introduced the Work Life Balance Directive, underpinned by a concern for women's labour market participation, gender equality and the more equal sharing of caring responsibilities. Sarah Schinazi of DG Employment introduced the Social Innovation Programme with its focus including work life balance issues, the work being done on data collection, and the need for a cultural shift in the workplace and in the home.

Demography and Choices

Introduction

Professor Renske Keizer, Professor in Family Sociology, Erasmus University, Rotterdam presented on issues of demography, particularly the spacing of birth of children in the family, and the influence of family leaves in this regard.

Themes

There has been significant change in family dynamics and fertility levels over the past 40 to 50 years with increasing participation by women in the labour market, the opportunity cost of having children, postponement in having children and decreased total fertility rate below replacement rate. Parental and maternity leave can boost fertility but this is a complex linkage.

An economic model underpins this analysis with the decision to have children understood as subject to an economic rationale. In this model a reduction in the cost of children or an increase in income should increase the demand for children. Policy influences direct costs (food, clothes, housing) and indirect costs (opportunity cost and loss of human capital investment once absent from the labour market). It can also influence personal preferences as policy can shift culture. However, socio-economic situations have to be taken into account as impact depends on people's income, labour market attachment, and level of education.

Two types of family policies are evident, general family policies to improve the situation of the family, and dual earner policies seeking greater participation by women in the labour market and by men in caring. Cash benefits, have a small but clear impact on the timing of births but their impact on overall fertility is less certain. The picture is inconclusive when it comes to leave entitlements. Recent studies using natural experiments suggest a positive impact of leave entitlements on fertility rates and on completed family size.

Natural experiments start from moments of policy change and compare what happens in relation to those who are eligible under the change and those who are ineligible under the change. Recent natural experiments establish that the combination of leave duration, financial benefits during leave, and whether or not parents need to return to the labour market in order to be eligible for renewal may affect birth spacing and fertility. They also point to dangers where fertility goals can end up being achieved at the cost of gender equality.

Paid and Unpaid Work

Introduction

Dr. Ania Plomien, Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science presented on the gender division of paid and unpaid work and its implications for gender equality and social progress.

Themes

Gendered inequalities in paid work and in unpaid work point to the need for real support for men's caring activities, reorganisation and reregulation of gendered working time, and state level involvement. While progress has been made, there is yet to be a transformation of gender relations.

The economy needs to be conceived in terms of production and social reproduction, paid and unpaid work, and involving the market, public sector, voluntary sector, and the household. Unpaid work holds substantial value. Neglecting a policy focus on care/housework leads to a double burden for women and a care deficit exacerbated by demographic change. If this is not addressed care work ends up being depleted and/or transferred onto marginalised groups.

Work life balance is pursued through three policy channels: cash-based policies, services provided, and time-based policies. Different combinations produce different models of work life balance and can either reinforce or challenge gender inequality. A transformative approach is needed to displace the current gender regime and realise a situation where on average, men and women contribute equally to both paid employment and unpaid care and housework. Such policies would make women's current life patterns the norm for everyone, ending the gendered opposition between breadwinning and caregiving. A stalled revolution is apparent with the influx of women into the labour market without an accompanying change in the role of men.

Growing proportions of the population favour more egalitarian shared family roles. Eurobarometer findings include that a minority (43%) believe the most important role of a man is to earn money (2017) and a majority (66%) disagree that the father must put career ahead of looking after young child (2015). Male working practices are unaltered with long working hours, intensification of work, long commutes and work cultures unsupportive of men and work-life balance. EU policy sustains a bifurcated approach evident in a gender neutral working time Directive and an explicitly gendered part-time work Directive. The norm of working time needs to be reconsidered.

Public policy has made a difference to women's participation in, and conditions of, paid and unpaid work. Public policy is a necessary (if not sufficient) condition

to re-start the stalled revolution by incorporating a focus on men. Could the European Pillar of Social Rights serve transformation in this way or will it merely end up instrumentalising gender equality for market goals without being transformative of gender relations?

Resources

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