

Families and sustainable societies

EU Project FamiliesAndSocieties final recommendations (II)

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This paper continues to summarize the main conclusions and policy recommendations of FamiliesAndSocieties European Union project. The focus will be set on policies encouraging and supporting parents while analyzing the outcomes of parents that spent more time with their children during the early stages of development. Also, strategies to promote higher levels of quality child care, out of school care and entertainment centres as significant to increase cognitive outcomes and success later in life.

The necessity to promote a work-life balance has been addressed in this European project, too. Labour market and family policies aimed to improve reconciliation of work and family responsibilities are critical to support new gender roles and the reallocation of paid and unpaid work between women and men.

Special consideration to women everywhere that virtually have been catching up in the public sphere more than is the case for men in the private sphere.

Education and information are also key policy issues in order to foresight towards the well-being of families and sustainable societies. The project's recommendations include the role of child education in reducing inequality in their lives' chances as adults, while information and counselling for parents helps them cope with

“Our project has been designed to generate comparative, in-depth, and scientifically grounded knowledge about family changes in Europe, their causes, and their consequences. It aims to improve the understanding of the complexity, the pace, the range, and the direction of these changes, and to distinguish and explain differences and similarities in family development and life-course transitions across Europe and within European nations. It furthermore seeks to elicit the linkages between policies and family dynamics, family diversity, and family trajectories, nationally and cross-nationally.”

Project coordinator Livia Sz. Oláh, Associate Professor of Demography at the Department of Sociology, Stockholm University. Interview: Insa Casens, Population Europe. 2013. [www.population-europe.eu/statement/family-change-not-over]

Extracted from 'Policy recommendations. Changing Families and sustainable societies. Policy contexts and diversity over the life course and across generations.' Laura Carlson, Livia Sz. Oláh and Barbara Hobson (SU). 2017. [Available at: www.familiesandsocieties.eu.]

parental roles, and raising awareness of employers—and society at large—enhances the understanding of challenges faced by parents.

Care and the well-being of children

Supporting parenting

Family-friendly policies, such as parental leave, must consider both parents, as time investments by parents are separable. Policies encouraging and supporting parents' efforts to spend more time with their children during the early stages of development and policies promoting high-quality formal child care, out of school care and leisure time centres have positive impacts on child outcomes. Affordable child care, out of school care and recreation should be available, given the positive association between formal child care and positive child outcomes. Child care can provide a channel to reduce inequality gaps, as it benefits disadvantaged and/or marginalized children most if there is affordable quality child care. Hence, there is a strong case for providing public funding of early childhood programs for them.

Child care policies also ought to consider the timing of any interventions according to its effectiveness in improving child development, as well as duration (and age of entry) of enrolment in childcare. Preliminary evidence indicates that longer external care, particularly more than 36 months of formal care, improves the child's early communication and verbal skills. The empirical findings suggest that early investments (private and public) in children are likely to significantly increase cognitive outcomes and are crucial to success later in life.

Minimizing the negative outcomes of separation/divorce

Fathers and mothers should have the same rights and obligations before and after a divorce or separation with respect to children. The promotion of co-parenting after a family break-up is beneficial for children where there is no parental conflict. When there is conflict during or after the dissolution, this should be tackled first before setting up a co-parenting strategy and parental plan. Co-parenting means more than equally shared time: It is two parents remaining equally involved and making all possible efforts to make important decisions together concerning a child, regardless of the time spent with the child. Formal parenting agreements and plans might be a positive next step towards successful co-parenting after divorce or separation.

In terms of economic impact, income transfers and policies aimed at helping divorced/separated parents find and maintain employment can be effective in combating the financial consequences of break-up and thus also weaken long-term negative effects on the children of separated and divorced parents. Also,

targeting psychological stressors and their effects on parenting and other social relationships, the availability of mediation/conciliation and counselling programmes are of great importance and key to successful family transitions. In general, all policies aimed at reducing social and economic inequalities and strengthening reconciliation of family and professional life will also help in reducing children's disadvantages and challenges associated with parents' divorce or separation.

Work-life balance

Key findings regarding the gender revolution

Depending on country and region, the male breadwinner – female homemaker family model has more or less given way to a dual earner model, where both men and women contribute to the family budget and share child care and household duties (to some extent). While men and women can no longer be said to be living in separate spheres, this transformation of gender roles, the "Gender Revolution", has been asymmetrical. Women everywhere have virtually been catching up in the public sphere more than is the case for men in the private sphere. In most countries, female labour market participation has been increasing much more than male participation in housework and child care.

As a result of these uneven changes, women today are often faced with a double burden or a second shift: after their paid work hours are fulfilled, they are still expected to take the main responsibilities at home. The difficulties of work-family reconciliation experienced by women, and the fact that women's labour force participation is often still subordinated to their organizing and caretaking role in family life, hinder the professional careers of many women and also influence childbearing decisions.

A newly emerging female breadwinner model is underpinned by two factors: the strengthening of women's labour market position based on their investments in education and career development, and the increasing number of couples with women having a higher educational level than their partners. The role of female breadwinner implies not only counter-normative behaviour by the mother, but demands for such behaviour also by the father as he relinquishes the ideal of a male breadwinner. This arrangement seems to carry a significant risk of conflict between partners, but also shows the potential for more egalitarian partnerships in other aspects, such as the division of household labour and care responsibilities. A nearly comparable change with respect to men is the emergence of the active/engaged father concept/practice. Yet, unlike the female breadwinner model, the "new father" brings more flexibility in realizing diverse gender self-concepts and less potential for conflict, accommodating a wide range of paternal behaviour.

Education is another driving factor for achieving parity in the gender revolution – education strengthens women’s opportunities to jointly develop their professional and family careers and also facilitates fathers’ engagement in family life. Until men’s contributions to domestic tasks and care work match those of women in paid work, i.e., when the dual earner -dual carer model is achieved, the “gender revolution” will remain incomplete.

Promote work-family balance

Both labour market and family policies aimed at better reconciliation of work and family responsibilities are required to support new gender roles and the reallocation of paid and unpaid work between women and men.

Policies strengthening women’s position as an economic provider and men’s role as a child care giver are of primary relevance. An increased uptake of leave by fathers contributes not only to enhancing their role as care-givers but also strengthens mothers’ employment and career prospects and professional development.

Parental leave policies ought to be individualized to each parent having a certain number of days that cannot be transferred to the other parent (“use it or lose it”). This gives an incentive for both parents to take leave, and help counteract the economic incentives of the higher income earner taking no leave and transferring the days to the other parent, usually the mother. Such policies also improve the wage and pension prospects of the parent who earns less by not being away from the labour force for a long period of time.

Moreover, the individualization of parental leave is changing workplace cultures and attitudes by enabling fathers to take longer leaves making it an accepted norm in the workplace. Thus these policies will also further gender equality. The research demonstrates that men who take longer parental leave also shoulder a larger share of the household chores even after the leave has ended.

Parental leave needs to be affordable. Income substitutes, transfers or benefits should replace a sufficiently high share of a parent’s previous income to make parental leave taking feasible for all parents. Low flat-rate benefits are not only a disincentive for men to take parental leave but they also increase the poverty risk for low income families and single parents.

Working time and flexibility are labour policy measures of crucial relevance for balancing work and family demands for parents, particularly in light of new gender roles. Fathers with care responsibilities ought to have the option of reducing working hours, which will enhance active fatherhood and help

strengthen the mothers’ position in the labour market. Currently, balancing work and care demands is managed predominantly by mothers, especially with children aged 0-3, either by withdrawing from the labour market or moving to part-time employment.

Legal, policy and practice provisions designed for families should be reviewed, considering ways of addressing their formal as well as de facto ‘mothers only’ provisions. Parents’ decisions are very much governed by the possibilities offered. For example, a parental benefit/child care allowance may at first glance appear gender neutral, but referring to a specific division of leave such as ‘12+2’, ‘15+3’ etc. suggests that mothers still take the larger share and fathers take two or three months of leave afterwards, reproducing and sustaining gender inequality.

Laws, policies and practices can also be assessed as to the representation of the role of men and women in the public sphere. Adding baby change units in men’s toilets or creating gender-free baby change units, promoting household utensils and baby products linked to men, ensuring that wording of bureaucratic forms and political programmes is addressed to women as well as men, are a few possibilities of making the public sensitive to gender-specific structures and, subsequently, open to gender-free structures. Father and child programmes can also be established. Here there is a need to parent-proof communication

Policy must also address the cultural values in specific national contexts, e.g. regarding the perception and acceptance of different family constellations. Cultural values also have to be taken into account, as they are important for de-gendering social relations and fostering more equal gender relations between women and men, between mothers and fathers.

Foresight towards the well-being of families and sustainable societies

Policy measures aiming to prevent/reduce the reproduction of vulnerability in families ought to be broad, complementary and embedded into a comprehensive strategy. They should comprise services addressing the needs of particularly vulnerable children as well as reconciliation policies, educational policies, care policies and other policy measures.

Education and information are key policy issues. Education of children reduces inequality in children’s life chances as adults. Information and counselling for parents helps them cope with parental roles, and raising awareness of employers—and society at large—enhances the understanding of challenges faced by parents. A better understanding of policy interventions that can most effectively prevent the transfer of parents’ vulnerability to their children is needed. Operative

policy monitoring would be helpful. In monitoring, policy measures need to be evaluated not only from the perspective of the well-being of families at present but also with regard to their impact on vulnerability reproduction across generations. Another aim is to facilitate acceptance of policy measures among parents, to avoid frustration and inefficiency.

Decreasing unemployment and inequalities in earnings in society at large is necessary if negative future developments with respect to economic, psychological and social vulnerability are to be prevented/reduced. In addition, measures strengthening the integration of current and future immigrants should be promoted in particular, in order to maintain social cohesion.

To be able to design policies for sustainable societies we need to extend our knowledge on the new roles of men and women and their implications for families and societies. Hence, new empirical evidence, either in a comparative perspective or concerning specific countries, is needed, but only a few large datasets in Europe are currently suited for researching the complexity of families.

To gain more and enhanced insights into the daily family life of complex family structures, we need similar datasets for European countries, providing for comparative European analyses. Moreover, longitudinal studies would enhance the understanding of family formation and dissolution processes. A special focus on various family members (especially children) would be particularly helpful here.

Data on family-related life-course transitions must be linked to educational and labour market biographies along with some information on the economic situation and views on gender attitudes. In addition to developing country-specific datasets in accordance with national needs and resources, more attention should be given to international data. For example, the GGS (Generations and Gender Survey) database seems to be a good starting point for further developments. As for the regular Eurostat surveys, such as LFS (Labour Force Survey) and EU- SILC (European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions), their modifications already suggested and being discussed would significantly increase their value for research on family change and gender and their implications for the society.

Key policy recommendations

The following key policy recommendations for 'Care and the well-being of children', 'Promoting a work-life balance', 'Foresight towards the well-being of families and sustainable societies' are highlighted for policymakers and based on main findings of the large-scale EU Seventh Framework project, 'Changing families and sustainable societies: Policy contexts and diversity over the life course and across generations' (FamiliesAndSocieties):

To be able to design policies for sustainable societies we need to extend our knowledge on the new roles of men and women and their implications for families and societies. Family-friendly policies, such as parental leave, should consider both parents, as each of their time investments matters for child development. Affordable childcare, out of school care and recreation should be available, given the positive association between formal childcare and positive child outcomes, which is stronger for children living in more disadvantaged environments. Early and universal access to formal childcare is also one of the most efficient interventions to reduce disadvantages among immigrant children.

Education and information are key policy issues. Education of children reduces inequality in children's life chances when they reach adulthood. Information and counselling for parents helps them to cope with parental roles, and raising awareness of employers—and society at large—enhances the understanding of challenges faced by parents.

Both labour market and family policies aimed at better reconciliation of work and family responsibilities are required to be supportive for the reallocation of paid and unpaid work between women and men, to diminish gender inequality in economic positions across the life course, and to promote rewarding contacts between generations. Policies aimed at reducing social and economic inequalities that favour the reconciliation of family life, private life and professional life will also help reduce children's disadvantages and challenges associated with parents' divorce or separation.