

Parental Childcare and the Employment Policy

Forms of public financial support for parents in day-long childcare

The Issue of Reconciling Employment, Family, School and the Public Creation of Values

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1. Initial Situation: Fulltime Care

All European countries are dealing with the issue of reconciling family and employment on the political level. At the same time, many of those rely significantly on establishing fulltime childcare facilities. On the other hand, the Czech Presidency has established its objective of raising home childcare as an independent alternative to a professional career. At the same time, the emphasis is to be placed on respecting the autonomy of families and their free choice, and the quality of childcare facilities, socio-cultural environment and the historical experience of individual member countries is to be decisive.

The construction of childcare facilities has been the centre of discussions on reconciling the family and work in all European states for many years - among others, due to the Barcelona targets for increasing the percentage of employed women: this is included in the term of "day-long childcare". With respect to French and Scandinavian experiences, a simple formula was at hand of establishing childcare facilities - day-long, if possible – which will result in increasing the number of employed women and, at the same time, increasing the fertility rate.

The simplicity of this formula is proven by other measures contributing to the relatively high fertility rate in Scandinavia: for example, the considerable extension of quality part-time employment, tax incentives for household childcare, supporting services on the municipal level, etc. Due to France enforcing a policy in favour of the fertility rate for several decades society has also adopted the reconciliation of family and employment from the cultural viewpoint. On the other hand the example of Ireland proves that a low rate of employed women - lower than in the majority of other European countries - may be in line with fertility, which is higher than the Scandinavian average.

It would be absolutely absurd to draw the conclusion from the Irish example that a decrease in the rate of employed women would result in an increase in the fertility rate, since the Irish example must be perceived from the culture tradition of the country; as much it is not acceptable to dictate the implementation of other models - such as the French model - in countries, where there are other socio-cultural prerequisites.

2. Freedom of choice: Macro and Micro Considerations

Due to these outlined considerations the critical paradigm for reconciling family care and employment becomes the freedom of choice, both within the European framework, and within the respective state establishments. While there is still a risk of including the choice between the family and another way of life under the term of freedom ("male breadwinner" vs. "double earner"); while the distinction of these two ways of life is based on reality, it is still very much stigmatized by the theoretical ideal patterns and the economic requirements to have labour forces available throughout the whole day. If we start from this polarization, day-long childcare is very often associated with the requirement of ensuring day-long operation and the establishment of day-long childcare facilities. However, within current politics this is very often in contradiction with the requirement for financial support of those families in which one of parents is excluded from paid employment because of childcare.

Wherever a political debate is held prior to this polarization, this political debate often misses the life reality of families to such an extent that it ignores the requirement for qualified part-time employment. This requirement not only differs by regions but it also significantly depends on the biographical

situation and the age of the child, as well as the mutual relation of the parents, thus it is not possible to simply fulfil it by creating sufficient childcare facilities and extending hours of operation.

If we look at the issue of reconciling family care and employment from viewpoint of various factors involved in families, we must admit freedom of choice on the micro level, as well, because families want to combine various life models: where men and women prior to enrolling the child in school want to provide childcare themselves and want to combine their double earning, freedom of choice must be perceived as a freedom to divide day-long childcare between childcare outside the family and family childcare.

Because the possibilities of families and the need for childcare outside the family may change in the short term on this micro level, i.e. regionally, it is economically expedient to support childcare in families and at the same provide a diverse range of childcare services outside of families so that even the short-term modified demand can be satisfied: from this viewpoint, day-long childcare needs to be ensured by measures for financial remuneration and social security of those mothers and fathers who take care of children in the family, as well as nurseries and kindergartens, "daily parents", childminder services, "mobile mothers", and support by au/pair, relatives, neighbours and the family circle.

The advantage of such diversified care is the local mobility of childminders and the decreased need to finance the operation of facilities. If remuneration and social protection is to be offered for these activities - perhaps by means of included hours worked - these types of care can also be established as positions for those involved in such care. This would result in these activities being included in the existing evaluation mechanisms for paid employment, and it could also have the effect of promoting the labour of women, from the viewpoint of the national economy.

3. Social Acceptation

In my opinion, various types of day-long childcare are an important signal witnessing the social acceptance of various forms of family life and life outside the family. From this viewpoint, I consider the effort of the Czech Presidency to make provisions for socio-economic and historical contexts of childcare as important and I want to promote this. It would be insufficient to reduce it further to a national point of view: only when respective socio-economic conditions of childcare are accepted within a single society can the reconciliation of family care and employment succeed.

The reconciliation of family care and employment must not be limited to adjusting the family situation so that each life situation of a family corresponds to economic requirements, but it must be seen as a challenge to counteract the requirements of families for economy and other areas of life.

Many possibilities are provided within the employment area, as substantiated by many ideas and examples: preventing over-long working hours and organizing important meetings late in the afternoon, generous provision of qualified part-time employment, the culture of holidays designed to be drawn and not saved up, establishing qualified remote workplaces, company acceptance of fathers involved in childcare, providing titles to be released from work in accordance with the law - too often, such ideas are just a dream. The obstacle of reconciling family life and employment is very often the organization of school, transfers and housing possibilities.

Last, but not least it is about whether society can accept families that need various forms of support so that they can provide day-long childcare. This higher acceptance of this way of living establishes, in my opinion, a significant dividing line between states with a relatively high and relatively low fertility rate. If in Scandinavia the way of living with a high fertility rate and double earnings is general socially accepted and supported, if in Ireland families without both partners employed are accepted despite having children, if in France an essential job of a woman is supported by early childcare outside the family; however families with multiple children are supported financially so that both parents do not need to work, it shows that acceptance of this way of living promotes reproduction in these societies. For Austrian society - and it may apply to other southern societies - we can on the contrary state that each life pattern is accepted as deficient: because of insufficient general social acceptance young people face the choice of either endangering their professional activity by having a family or being labelled neglectful parents because of their paid employment, which may explain the low fertility rate.

I am convinced that only societies that accept the decision of parents on the arrangement of their family life, relations and life outside the family, by providing them with the required childcare through combining childcare in the family and outside the family, can report stable reproduction in the long-term.

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