

Between care needs and equal opportunities goals, for women, but also children

Chiara Saraceno

Premise

In order to grow up healthy, secure of their place in life, rooted, but also able to move and change, children need to receive adequate care and education and to develop meaningful interpersonal relationships starting in their early years. Of course, parents and close family are the first important relations. And lack of parental acceptance and care may be very harmful for overall child development. Yet, whether those articulated needs may be fully and adequately met by parents alone and until what age is open to discussion. It depends, of course, on a child's age. But it depends also on the overall family environment. Small urban nuclear families based on a strong gender division of labor may concentrate all the chances of a small child's well being on the quality of mother-child relationship to a degree unknown in other historical and social contexts, where households are, or were, embedded in larger kinship networks, there were more adult figures as well as children of different ages around.

The role that might be played by non family contexts in the care, but also emotional and relational, as well as cognitive, development of children should be looked at also from the perspective of changed family and household contexts.¹ Mother's labor force participation is, at least in some countries, a relatively new element of this changing context, although we should be aware of the fact that women's labor force participation may have a different history in different countries, including a different history of combining child care needs with paid work. This history, in turn, has shaped understandings of what are good and bad solutions. Another element of changing contexts of childhood is demography, with the aging of kinship networks and the rarefaction of children. Children increasingly grow up having more adults than children around, lacking, until they go to school, the everyday experience of being with peers. And their parents often also do not have the experience of being around children and having some responsibility for them until they actual become parents. From this perspective, collective services are a means of giving children a structured opportunity to share and confront themselves with other children, and to parents the opportunity to "compare notes" and receive cognitive support from other parents as well as from teachers. It is actually worthwhile noting that this dual need, of children and of parents, in some country has prompted the development of places where also children of full time homemakers, or children cared for by grandparents or babysitters, may go for a few hours a few days a week to play with other children under the supervision of some professional educator, while their carers share experiences, ask for advice and so forth.

Still another relevant family change is marriage and partnership instability, which creates specific risks of both income and relationship poverty for children. Finally, there is an old/new dimension which is increasingly being focused on when debating on early child education: inequalities among children in the material, but also cultural and relational resources while growing up. These inequalities affect the children's overall well-being,

¹ On the changing contexts in which children are growing up in the developed countries see e.g. Leira and Saraceno (eds.), 2008. Specifically on the phenomenon of ageing kinships see Saraceno (ed.), 2008

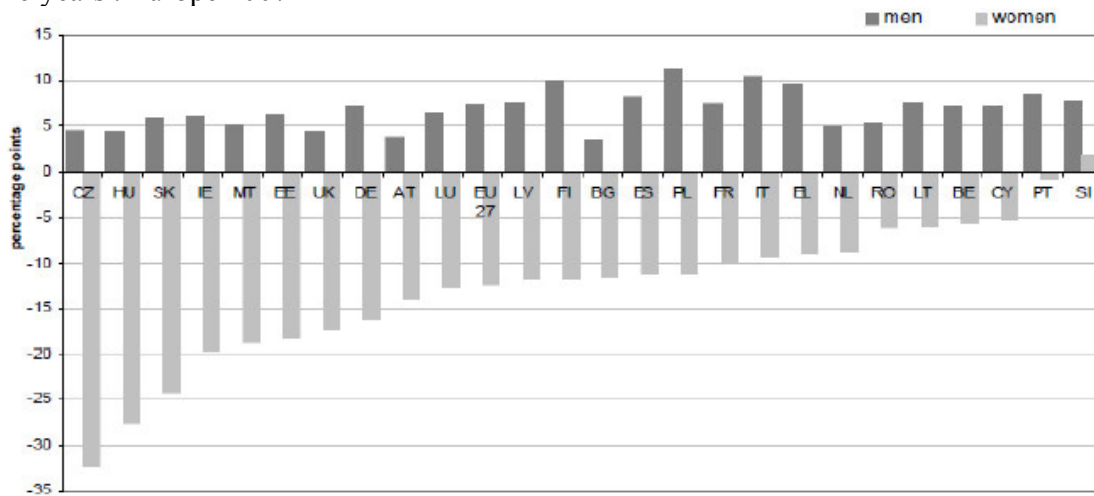
and to some degree also their cognitive development. As child poverty, it is not a new phenomenon. But, as in poverty, some of its causes, for instance migration, are new.

Mothers' employment and children's needs: necessarily contrasting interests?

The idea that there may be a contrast between young children needs and mothers' labor market participation is the result of complex socio-historical developments. On the one hand, there is the historical – dating before psychoanalysis and child psychology - “discovery of childhood” (Aries 1962) as a specific stage of life with its needs. This discovery, which for a long time affected only children of the higher classes, in the second half of the twentieth century became a widespread value across social classes and in many countries was intertwined with the “invention” of motherhood as a specific and somewhat overarching women's role. At the same time, the development of industrial economy and work, together with the development of the nuclear family, rendered more difficult for women to combine child care with working as many women of the peasant and working classes had done for centuries. But it also contributed to separate the world and needs of the workplace from those of the family and particularly from the caring needs. The creation of the male breadwinner family, where fathers were removed from any responsibility for the care of children and mothers removed from participation to the labor market was both the consequence and the means of this separation (Crouch 1999). Any incompatibility between mothers' paid work and children's care and relational needs was therefore the outcome of both the organization of paid work and the gender division of work within the household. Both these dimensions must be addressed if that incompatibility is to be overcome. One criticism that may be levied against the European employment policy is that it has stressed too exclusively the women's employment part, underplaying the issues of the quality, length and organization of work for both men and women and of the gender division of labor, therefore of actual equal opportunities. It has also to some degree downplayed the issue of the time and quality of care (see e.g. Lewis 2008, Saraceno 2008).

Mothers' increasing labor market participation in all developed countries, in fact, unbalances the organization of both the market and the family premised on the male breadwinner/woman carer. Just integrating mothers into the labor market without changing the rules is bound to create tensions. As a matter of fact, these tensions are clearly visible in the way having a small child affects women's labor market participation, as shown in figure 1. That figure, in fact, indicates that it is mothers, rather than fathers, who continue to be responsible for the care of young children. Furthermore, even when mothers do not exit altogether the labor force when they have one or more children, they often work part time, temporarily (e.g. in the Scandinavian countries) or on a long term basis, as it happens more often in Germany or in the Netherlands. That is, working mothers accommodate their working time to what they perceive as the needs of children, even at the cost of losing their financial autonomy or weakening their chances in the labor market.

Fig. 1 employment impact of parenthoohd for men and women without and with children < 6 years . Europe 2007



Source: 2007 EU Labor Force Surveys, provisional data, Sweden and Denmark not available

Whether it is a matter of choices and preferences or of constraints, it is not easy to decide. Cross national and cross class differences both in the impact of having a small child and in part time suggest that not only individual preferences are at play. Rather, differences seem to be the outcome of a mixture of structural options both in the labor market and in social policies, of national (and social group specific) cultural values concerning mothers' obligations and children's needs, of the relevance of kin networks and particularly of grandmothers, and so forth (e.g. Lewis, Campbell and Huerta 2008). In any case, it emerges that while mothers take on themselves the responsibility (and pleasure) to respond to the caring and relational needs of small children, rearranging their modes of participation to the labor markets, fathers don't and this creates not only gender inequality in the labor market and in economic relationships within the couple. It creates also specific risks of poverty for mothers and children.

Mothers' labor market participation is, as a matter of fact, one of the most important means for protecting children from poverty. Although living in a household where no adult is in paid work presents the highest risk of poverty for children, the majority of children who are poor live in a household where at least one adult is in work. Having both parents in paid work protects households and children from the loss of work by one parent, from inadequacy of individual work income, and also from one of the main causes of children's poverty in many countries: partnership/marriage break up. Gornick (2004), for instance, found that in the OECD countries she studied, the lowest the share of the household income controlled (i.e. earned/owned) directly by the mother, the highest the vulnerability to poverty of children (as well as of mothers). Increasing fathers' earnings and also paying child benefits does not diminish this vulnerability, although it might, of course, improve children's economic wellbeing as long as three conditions are simultaneously present: the father keeps his job, the parental couple stays together and the father shares his income with the mother and children on the basis of need. As many studies show, however, these conditions are not always present in real life.

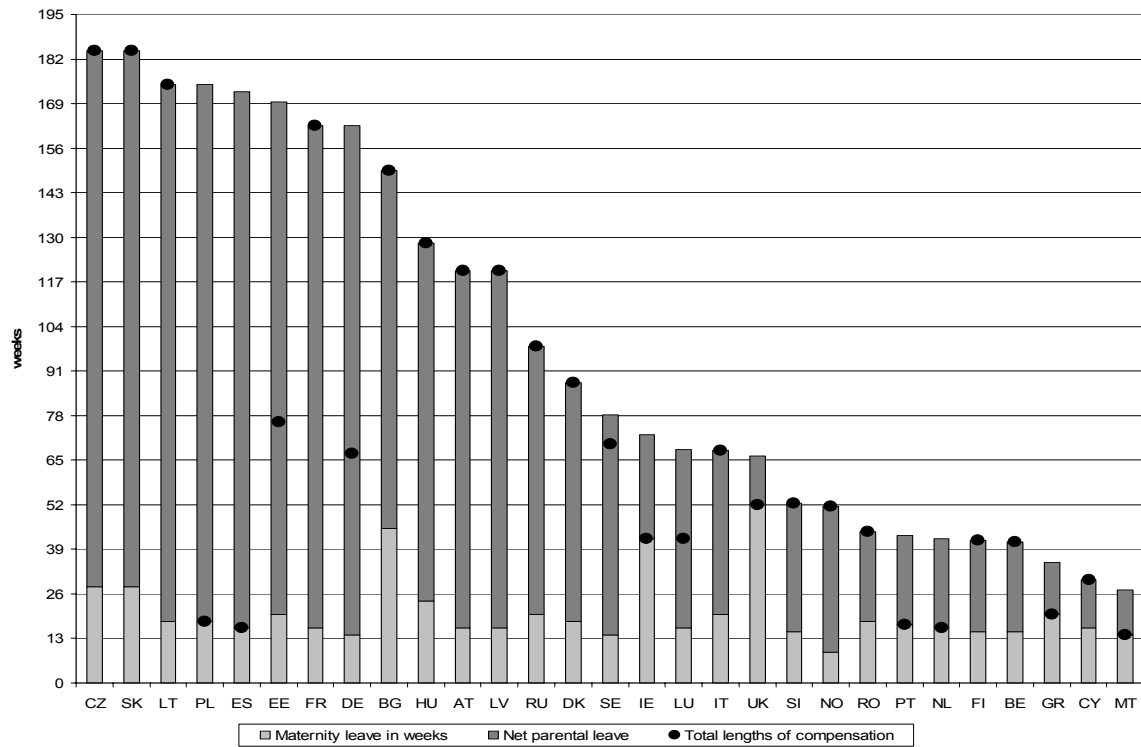
Protecting children from poverty protects them also from inequalities among children in cognitive development and health that many studies have found are associated with living in poor households and environment, although the underlying mechanisms are complex (e.g. Gregg, Propper and Washbrook 2007, Waldfogel 2002). Since these mechanisms partly involve also parental low education, offering children early on an additional social and educational environment, not as a family substitute, but as integration to family care and education, may be a reason in itself for providing early childcare, irrespective of the mother's working status.

Finally, it should be pointed out that a mother's participation to paid work does not necessarily imply a strong reduction in the family caring and relation time for children, for at least three different reasons. First, when mothers are not in paid work they do not necessarily devote all their time to children. Caring for, watching over children is often mixed with other activities: household chores, shopping, time with friends and so forth. Second, working mothers often reduce the time they devote to household chores and to social activities in order to have more time for their children. Third, when the mother is in paid work, fathers are more often involved in child care and generally in activities with children. Thus children of working mothers have the benefit of a higher presence of fathers in their lives (Bianchi 2000, Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson 2004). Of course, once again it is an issue of timing, and therefore of the most adequate length of parental leave, but also of time and of quality of work, as well of overall resources: too long working hours, too tiring jobs, too many financial preoccupations – all these strongly constrain the possibility to spend a relaxed and serene time. Imputing every difficulty to the simple fact that the “mother works” is a very simplistic way of looking at the context in which parents and children live and develop their relationship.

The politics and policies of childcare in Europe. An overview

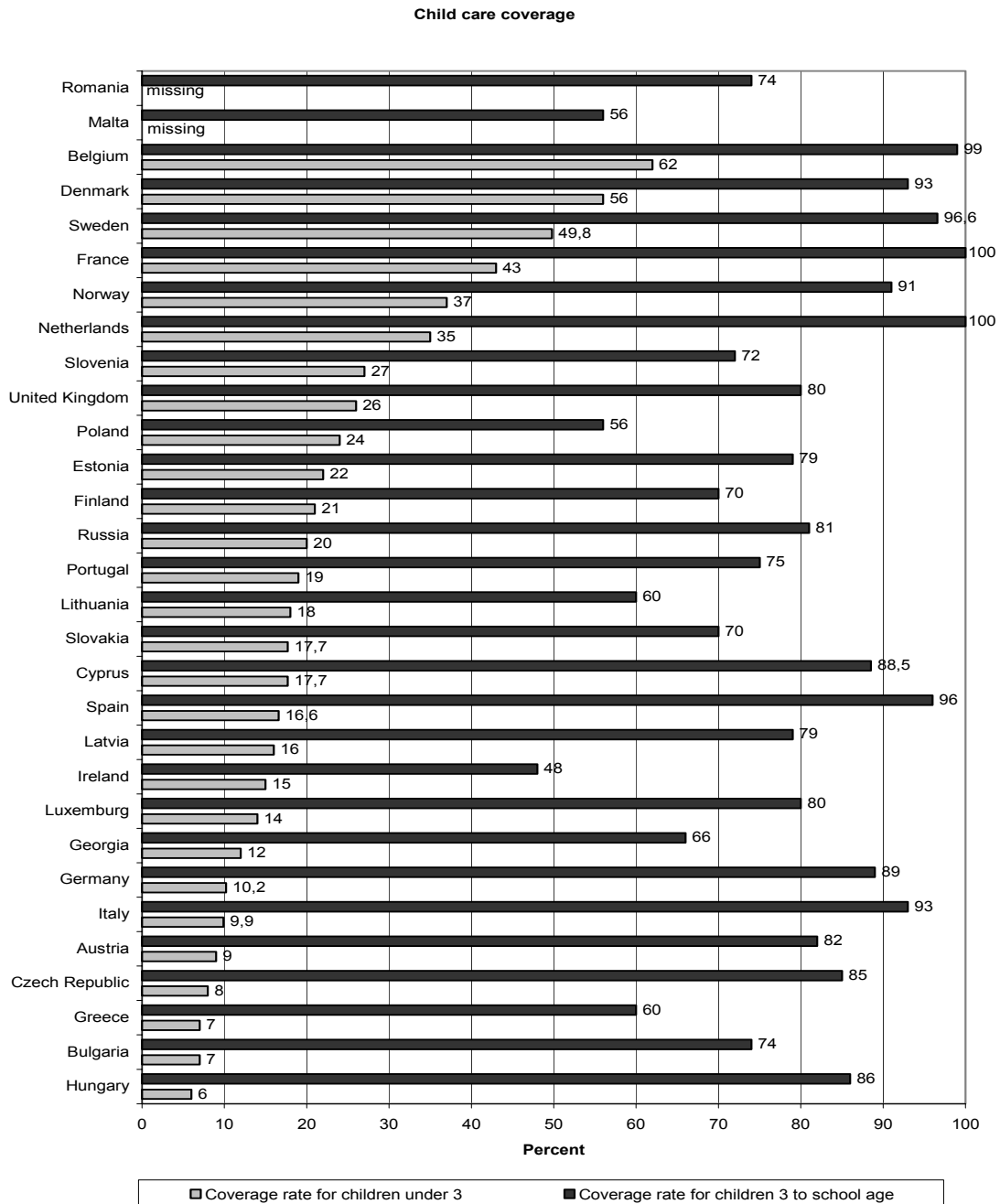
In all European countries we may find a combination of (maternity and parental) leaves and of provision of services. Yet, there are wide cross country differences in all the items which make up the social care package for pre-school children: in length and compensation of maternity leave (although the European directive has set a minimum threshold for both dimensions), particularly in length and compensation of parental leave, whether or not and in what form the latter is opened up to fathers (and in some country, as in Bulgaria and Hungary also grandparents), coverage through services for children under three, coverage through services for children 3 to school age. Further differences we might detect also for school age children, whose need of care and supervision do not stop when they enter the elementary school, but are met by quite different modes of organization by and around the school. These combinations, on the one hand, shape different options for parents (mothers) and different possible experiences for children. On the other hand, they define different responsibilities between mothers and fathers, and between families and collectivity. Fig. 2 and 3 show the substantial width of some these differences (length of leaves and childcare coverage).

Fig. 2 Overall length of maternity+parental leave. And length of compensation, irrespective of compensation level. EU27 and Russia



Sources: various sources

Fig. 3 Childcare coverage (through publicly supported services) in EU and Russia. Children under three and three-until school age

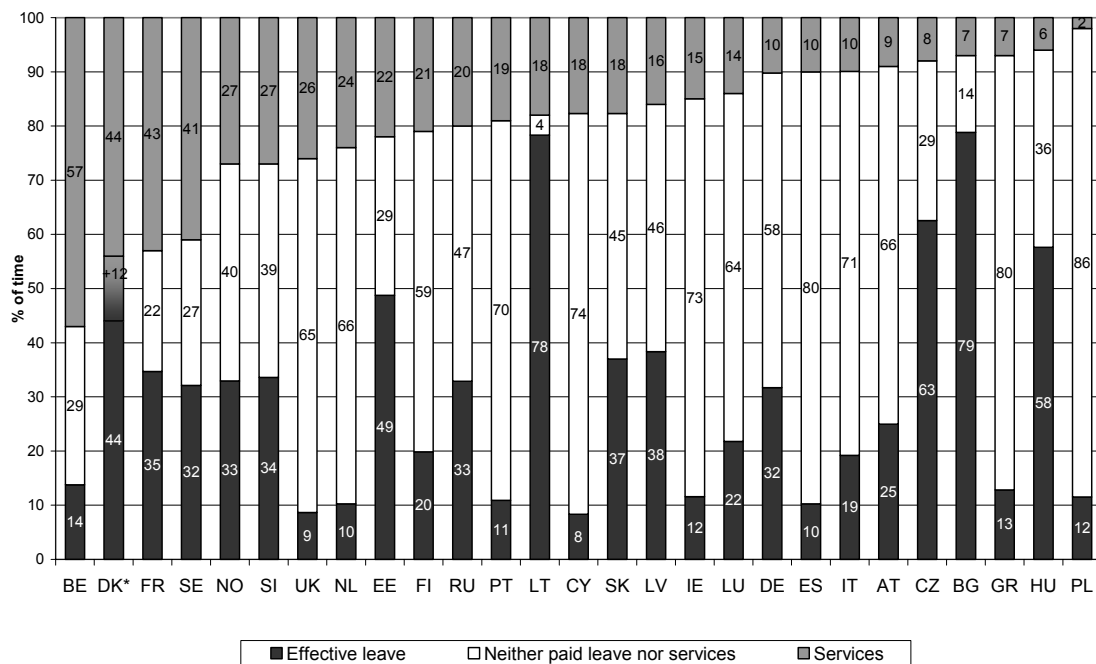


Sources: Various sources

The widest differences concern leaves on the one hand, with regard to overall length but also duration and level of compensation, and childcare for children under three. Since leaves and services represent two alternative ways of dealing with the caring needs of very young children, it is important to see how the overall package is arranged in each

country and how much is left to families (and through them to the market) with no support whatsoever (fig. 4). In order to do this, not only length of leaves, but also level of compensation must be taken account of, since a long leave with no or little compensation allows time off paid work but at a very high financial cost particularly when a family is growing. For this reason, in order to assess the “effective leave” in terms of compensation,² the duration of leaves has been weighted on the basis of compensation level, taking as a reference the average wage in each country.

Fig. 4 Child care coverage through “effective leave” and publicly financed services, in working weeks. Children 0-2. EU27 and Russia, 2003- 2007



Source: various sources and Saraceno and Keck 2008

Fig. 4 clearly shows that long leaves do not always coincide with long full compensation. The countries with the longest effective leaves belong all to the former communist block, suggesting that long leaves might be both a reaction to negative experiences with child care services in the past combined with long working hours for parents and a way of dealing with unemployment. These countries, however, give no or very limited access to leaves to fathers, thus supporting also in law a strong gender division of responsibilities between mothers and fathers. Coupled with the encouragement to take long leaves, this may result in long term negative impact on mothers’ chances in the labor market. Another clear message which emerges from the figure is that not only there are quite different levels of overall coverage of young children’s caring needs across the EU, but that the same level of coverage may be obtained through distinct means, namely through

² The concept of “effective leave” has been first developed by Plantenga et al. (2008). But they have taken as a point of reference the minimum wage, which in my opinion in many countries is too low to offer a realistic measure of actual compensation. The calculations presented here are the results of work done within a EU funded project – MULTILINKS. See Saraceno and Keck 2008. -.

adequately compensated leaves or through the offer of child care. These different combinations only partly overlap with patterns of women's/mothers' labor market participation, in so far we may find high levels of women's labor force participation in countries, such as Portugal, where effective leaves are short and services scarce. Clearly in this case, more than the market it is the extended family which supports working mothers. The same occurs in Italy, where women's labor force participation is lower than average in Europe, but it involves over half of all mothers of small children and it is mostly full time, differently from the Netherlands, where mothers mostly work part time, and also from the Scandinavian countries, where mothers often temporarily shift to part time work, returning to full time when the child is older (see also Lewis, Campbell and Huerta 2008). In other words, while substantial coverage by effective leaves and services supports conciliation between paid work and child care for women, encouraging women's labor force participation while granting child care, the reverse is not always true. Also when coverage is scant, mothers might decide, or need, to be in paid work and must find other – family or formal or informal market solutions for child care while they are at work. Furthermore, combining work and care may involve different combinations: part time use of non family care with part time work, full time use of non family care with full time work, various combinations of non core (parental) care and so forth.

The different policy packages, together with the different strategies developed by families and particularly by mothers to deal with children caring needs result in different experiences and also risks for women and children. From the point of view of women's labor force participation and fathers' participation in care giving, existing research indicates, first, that the longest and the less compensated the leaves, the more they are feminized (even when in theory they are open also to fathers) and the more they produce polarized behaviors among women mostly based on social class/education. Second, the longest the leaves actually taken by one single parent – de facto the mother – the more difficult is for her to re-enter the labor market. Third, with regard specifically to fathers' involvement in early child care, it is not enough to allow fathers to take part of the parental leave. If there is not a “take it or loose it” quota, they are not likely to take it (also because their entitlement is weaker in the eyes of the employers). Swedish and Norwegian fathers started to take some leave when the “take it or loose it” rule was introduced. In Denmark, where there is no such a rule, fathers tend not to take any leave, although the level of compensation is very similar to that in the other two Scandinavian countries. In Italy, where there is a “take it or loose it” rule, but parental leave is little compensated (only 30% of lost pay), fathers rarely take it. Fourth, the possibility to use the parental leave in a flexible way and part time, encourages both leave sharing among parents and labor market attachment of mothers, reducing also the demand for (particularly full time) care for very young children. Fifth, cost of child care affects usage more among the low income families than the higher income ones (thus subsidized care has an important redistributive effect). Finally, quality of childcare, together with quantity, affects strongly legitimization and acceptance

From the point of view of children's welfare, research data present a nuanced picture. Overall (see Waldfogel 2002, Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller and Rumberger 2007, and also the overview in UNICEF 2008), they stress the importance of a stable and secure relational environment. Thus too short leaves may be harmful, particularly if there are not good surrogates for an individualized care (but one should also remember that also

parental care does not always provide the standards which are defined as adequate). Negative effects of early child care are more likely the younger the age. But the positive effects on cognitive development are highest when early education starts around at 2 years, rather than later. The quality of non family care is of course important, as well as daily duration of attendance. But as important are the hours of work and overall of mothers' (and father's) work experience, in so far it affects the quality and quantity of time spent with the child. All these different impacts have a different intensity depending on family income and other characteristics such as race and migrant background. In this perspective, a one year well compensated parental leave, possibly shared between parents, followed by a working time schedule which allows for time to care and develop intense relationships seems the most adequate to balance the diverse needs of children.

Concluding remarks

Issues of children's needs - and generally care - go beyond the scope of employment policies, but must be integrated into employment policies. One of the limits of the European employment strategy has been the undervaluation of care both as a valued and valuable activity and as requiring high attention for quality, organization, timing and so forth. Focus should be redirected to strengthening opportunities and options and to avoiding impossible trade-offs and dead-end choices. Duncan et al. (2004), on the basis of a qualitative study on different groups of women, for instance suggest that child care choices result from complex moral and emotional processes in assessing both children's needs, and the mother's own. Different social groups refer to and elaborate differently alternative 'normatives'. Child care evaluations are one part of mothers' value systems, and in turn these emerge in specific social and geographical contexts. It is not just a question of the quantity of child care, but also of its quality and nature, and these judgments about quality and nature vary socially and geographically. It is worthwhile observing, for instance, that in countries where both mothers' labor market participation (full or part time) and offer of quality controlled childcare are more widespread, the idea that if mother works children under school age are going to suffer is less widespread than in countries where either mothers' labor market participation or child care offer or both are low.

In any case, the mere provision of child care is not an adequate policy response to the problems of combining caring for children with employment. It is also necessary to deal with expectations concerning what is proper care in different social groups, particularly for very young children. Combining leave and childcare services in a flexible way is a partial way to deal with this. Another is to differentiate the kind of services which are supported. And focus should also be more strongly directed towards encouraging a stronger presence of fathers in child care and lives. But also family friendly working arrangements and equal opportunities in the labor market are important. Furthermore, in order to acknowledge the value of child caring and to at least partially offset the negative impact that having children has on the labor market participation of mothers and also on their pension benefits, virtual contributions towards pension benefits should be paid to mothers for each child, irrespective of working status. In some countries, such as Germany, this occurs already (one year of virtual contributions for each child), while in France the virtual contribution may not be added to a normal contribution for the same period, but can only be paid in alternative to it. But if mothers, including working

mothers, take the main responsibility to care, this should be acknowledged as a basis for a specific, autonomous entitlement.

Finally, issues of equal opportunities among children and of social justice with regard to children should take a central place in any discussion concerning early child care and education.

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