

What kind of "social Europe"? The example of child care ^[1]

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Excerpts from introduction

Childcare is central to contemporary welfare state redesign. The “defamilialisation” of care, resulting from women’s rising labour force participation rate, is generating demands for states to take on new responsibilities, as families cannot rely exclusively on markets to meet these needs. As the OECD noted, “In many countries, the education and care of young children is shifting from the private to the public domain, with much attention to the complementary roles of family and early childhood education and care institutions in young children’s early development and learning” (2001: 9). There are, however, different ways of addressing the “care deficit” and each holds different implications for equality in general, and for gender equality in particular. In Europe, there are three rival models: a “Third Way” design, inspiring childcare policy reforms in the Netherlands and the UK; the neo-familialist turn taken in Finland and France, and the egalitarian horizons of Danish and Swedish childcare policy. Each approximates one of Nancy Fraser’s (1997) alternatives to the male breadwinner model that formed the postwar norm. These are examined in section two.

Globalisation is altering the environment in which states make choices, however, especially in Europe. While national politics still matters, the struggle to build a “Social Europe” is engaging member states in reflexive practices, opening them to new and different ideas for welfare state redesign. The third section accordingly examines the way in which early childhood education and care (ECEC) now forms part of the agenda for a Social Europe. Initially brought onto the agenda as part of the EU’s growing interest in gender equality, childcare has become part of the post-Delors employment strategy. Like the European Monetary Union, the employment strategy utilizes a new method of governance, “open method coordination” (OMC), in which European guidelines and benchmarks play a critical role. We ask which of the competing models of care provision, if any, has come to define “best practice” for Europe and what does this tell us about the contours of “Social Europe”?

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: child care policy ^[4]

gender equality ^[5]

women's labour force participation ^[6]

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