

Family policies in industrialized countries: Is there convergence?

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Abstract

Family policies have changed significantly since the 1970s. While the policies introduced immediately after World War II were based on a male breadwinner model, the post-1970s policies have acknowledged the increase in dual-earner families, the growing instability and diversity of families, and the families' growing economic vulnerability (Gauthier, 1996). These changes in the nature of family policies are not unique to a specific set of countries but have been observed in all industrialized countries. In countries as different as France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom, family policies have been reformed in order to better support working parents, single parents, and low-income families (Kamerman and Kahn, 1997a). The question that therefore arises is: Have these changes resulted in a cross-national convergence in family policies? Somewhat surprisingly, this question has not been addressed in the literature. There is a growing literature on the possible globalization of welfare states and on the possible emergence of a European welfare state, but the specific case of family policies has not been addressed.

This article aims at filling in this gap in the literature. Based on empirical indicators of family policies in 22 industrialized countries, the article analyses the trends in family policies since 1970 and examines their degree of cross-national convergence.

The article is structured around four sections. Section I reviews the relevant literature and positions this study in a larger body of literature on globalization and convergence of welfare states. Section II is devoted to a discussion of the theoretical determinants of family policy in order to improve our understanding of the relationship between demographic trends and policy responses and to assess the role of national and international-level factors. Section III presents our data and methods, and Section IV presents our results. The article concludes with a discussion of future avenues of research.

Before turning to our review of the literature, it is important to note that very few countries have adopted an explicit and comprehensive family policy (Kamerman and Kahn, 1978). Instead, most countries have an amalgam of programmes, policies, and laws that are targeted at families with children. For this reason, we use the plural form of "family policies" in this article. We also use, as synonymous, the term "state support for families".

Region: International [3]

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