

The OECD and the reconciliation agenda: Competing blueprints


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Across advanced capitalist countries, welfare state restructuring has come to include a "farewell to maternalism" - i.e. to the political support for mothers' fulltime domestic caregiving role (Orloff, 2004). For some, the "farewell" is identified with the withdrawal of support for mother-caregivers, especially in the form of the shift from "welfare to workfare" for lone parents. Yet it also involves the prescription of measures to reconcile work and family life. Just like the earlier maternalist policies, these new measures can take different forms, with quite different consequences for women's equality and for children's rights.

National states continue to play an important role in redesigning welfare regimes to meet new challenges. Yet channels of policy learning are increasingly multi-scalar, including an important role for transnational flows of ideas or "fast policy", packaged as a set of transferable "best practices" (Peck, 2002). This paper focuses on the prescriptions for post-maternalism on offer from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s, the OECD's outlook bore a marked neo-liberal stamp. It will be argued, however, that its important series dealing with reconciliation policies reflects a "third way" perspective. This set of prescriptions promotes a shallow version of gender equity and does little for the rights of children. The key concern is the formation of flexible labour markets and households for a globalised economy. This is not, however, its only prescription for bidding farewell to maternalism. The special thematic review on early childhood education and care stakes out an alternative that is not only more "woman-friendly" but also treats children as citizens "in the here and now", and not simply investments in the future.

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