

## Reconciling a child's best interest with labour market needs

Dr. Agata D'Addato  
Eurochild\*

### 1. Assessment of the policy debate at European level

Eurochild broadly agrees with the issues which have been raised both in the discussion and in the host papers. Notably:

- *Couples are having fewer children than they would like* (1.5 compared to 2.4). Against the background of the current demographic slowdown in Europe, family policies play an important role to deal with the challenge of an ageing population, by making it easier for people to have the number of children they desire.
- *Women still pay a huge economic penalty for having children*. Participation of mothers in the labour market participation is still much lower than that of women without children in nearly all EU countries. In an attempt to ease the work-parenting conflict, mothers returning to work after paid leave or after family-related labour force exit often do so on a part-time basis or on short-term contracts. Although this may be more compatible with child rearing responsibilities, they have lower income and loose out on social security and pension rights. Policies encouraging women back into the labour market must ensure they do not pay a long-lasting social and economic penalty for doing so.
- The *unequal division of domestic and family responsibilities between women and men* remains very marked in most EU Member States. Women are the ones who still carry the burden of child care and take on most of the domestic tasks.

Although we share the general lines and statements, we believe that the paper fails to address policy from the perspective of the best interest of the child and to put a high priority on child well-being. We argue that the expansion of the labour market cannot take place without giving an adequate attention to services and investment in the quality of childhood.

Early childhood is a crucial part of the life cycle as it is well documented that the child's well-being, development and happiness at this stage exert a significant impact on his/her later development and prospects into adulthood. As parents are the crucial socializing agency of children, policies have to strengthen their responsibility and support them in their child rearing tasks. A parent's responsibility is to support the emotional and physical nurturing and cognitive

---

\* Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Our work focuses particularly on the fight against child poverty and social exclusion in Europe and is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Eurochild is co-funded by the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013). This programme is managed by the Directorate-Generale for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission. It was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment and social affairs area, as set out in the Social Agenda, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy goals in these fields.

development of children and gradually to empower their children to exercise their own rights, transferring power to the child, in line with the child's evolving capacities.

At the same time, there must be a much greater recognition of the need to support parents in the parenting task. Namely, parents may lack access to the resources necessary to ensure the right conditions for the growth and development of the child through a positive and stimulating setting. Articles 18 (para.2 and 3) and 27 (para.3) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child specify that states should adopt the appropriate measures in order to help parents and other guardians ensure the necessary conditions for the child's development. The role of the state is thus crucially important since policies may have a significant impact on improving the conditions of families' and children's lives.

There is a clear need to move from a male breadwinner model to a modern framework where either parent can choose to work, or take career breaks for care responsibilities without suffering long-term economic disadvantage. In addressing the important issue of female labour market participation, we must ensure that the care and education of children is a central part of the picture. It is critical not just for the well-being of children today, but also for the best interest of our society tomorrow.

## 2. Applicability

### 2.1 Values of the programme

We welcome the values that the German policy is trying to promote. Combating gender stereotypes, achieving gender balance, encouraging men to take on an equal share of family and childcare responsibilities are all very positive and crucial aspects. It is interesting to note that, according to the latest statistics, almost 20% of fathers in Germany now take parental leave, although the policy was only introduced in January 2007. This in itself is an important development from which other Member States can take inspiration.

Experience from other member states (e.g. UK) suggests that take-up of paternity leave is low, particularly among those with low to medium income who cannot afford a drop in earnings at a time when their expenditure is rising.

The aim of changing attitudes in society and among employers including policies of private firms is also welcome. The attempt to encourage companies to invest in family-friendly policies as well as to heighten employers' awareness of the additional value that older women returning to work may provide is appreciated.

The German programme focuses mainly on women over 40 who have been inactive due to care responsibilities and are willing and ready to return to work. It may be helpful for other countries characterised by a lower employment rate among women older than 40 years to learn from this experience.

Another positive aspect of the programme seems to be the cooperation between different government agencies and regional and local authorities. Good policy and practice on family and parental support must be multi-dimensional and multi-focused but at the same well cross-sector coordinated at the national and local level so that gaps or overlaps in service and policy provision are avoided.

## 2.2 Potential obstacles

The management of this life stage by women depends on the *economic and cultural environment* in which they live, and more specifically on three components: attitudes towards working mothers and perception of the gender roles; individual and collective opinions concerning whether women may have important roles outside the home; the financial importance of the woman's job for the family. Individual behaviours, such as the ability of women to cope with the constraints and involvements of other family members, namely the father or grandmothers of the baby, may also be important factors.

There needs to be a change in the way women perceive the parenting role. There is good research evidence suggesting that one of the barriers to greater father involvement is the gate-keeping of women. We could hardly achieve equality for women in the workplace until we achieve parity for men in the home.

## 3. Important questions being raised in stakeholders' organisations

### 3.1 Promoting a child's best interest

Eurochild strongly believes that the promotion of child's best interest and child's rights through positive parenting<sup>1</sup> policies must be a priority. Creating the right conditions for positive parenting means ensuring access to appropriate material, psychological, social and cultural resources; taking steps to remove barriers to positive family environment, such as promoting policies to improve the reconciliation of family and professional life, and raising awareness of the value of positive parenting to parents, children and the state.

The chances of failure become greater for children coming from environments characterised by weak parenting, low aspirations and poverty. Parents have indeed an irreplaceable role in nurturing children. As the first educators of their children, they provide the environment in which primary human traits can develop: emotional stability, self-regulation, cognitive skills, sociability and learning motivation.

Labour market participation is *usually* the best means of raising self-esteem and satisfaction of mothers, as well as ensuring an adequate income for the family. However, labour market participation must not be pursued at all cost. An adequate income and access to services for all are essential to ensure children in jobless households are not disadvantaged.

### 3.2 Quality early years care

The need to raise childcare provision remains true but we strongly urge policies to change perspective and consider not only parents' needs and rights but also the rights and the interest of the other part involved in the picture, namely the children. In fact, care services (in particular for early years) designed solely to fulfil the needs of parents, may have a negative impact on the life of the child.

<sup>1</sup> The Council of Europe defines Positive Parenting as "*parental behaviour, based on the best interest of the child, that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent, and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child*". Recommendation 19 [2006] December 2006.

Our concern is to ensure that a child rights approach is mainstreamed in the provision of early years care and that an optimal framework for mental and physical development of the child is created. Thus, measures bringing valuable benefits to children's growth whilst improving the well-being of parents and their contribution to the labour market are needed.

It is not only about *quantity*, but also about *quality*: government should not only be concerned about increasing care provision, but also about what kinds of provision are provided. We strongly encourage member states to go further and establish qualitative standards for care services. A purely economic perspective, solely aiming at freeing parent's time for work, can no longer be taken when putting in place genuine parenting support services.

Furthermore, the social value of childcare provision should be considered. Namely, childcare services are also conducive to achieving social cohesion and fundamental social democratic goals – making gender equality and equal opportunities a reality, eliminating poverty, maximising life chances of all children irrespective of the parent's socio-economic background. For breaking cycles of family deprivation, reducing inequalities and combating discrimination, universal early childhood services are indeed essential.

High quality, access and affordability of those services especially for children in need of special support also ought to be considered, as parents in vulnerable situations may lack access to the resources necessary to ensure the right conditions for a positive child development. For instance, ethnic minority children – especially those whose native language is not the home country's language – benefit enormously from early years childcare since they get a head start in language learning and improve their chances of integrating later on in school and their communities.

We have stressed the centrality of early years services to the positive development of the child. However, these are rarely designed, or delivered with fathers in mind. A cultural change in this sense is urgently needed.

### 3.3 Providing a holistic policy approach

From Eurochild's point of view it is indispensable to provide holistic services to families – labour market policies, care facilities and other family support, flexible work arrangements, parental leave, etc. – from a child sensitive approach. What is needed is indeed a coherent, integrated and multi-dimensional policy approach, in which care provision and leave facilities are matched with better working time arrangements in full time employment and more flexibility for workers without neglecting the best interest of the child.

Using the perspective of a child's life course and linking childcare, education and leisure activities, while at the same time enhancing flexibility and diversity appears a core issue for the future. Fragmentation, non-corresponding time schedules and difficulties in transitions from one service to another should be considered as inefficiencies which unable the child to grow up in the best environment.

When talking about holistic services we should also be considering the role of tax and benefits systems which can form an important component of the overall package.

### 3.4 Promoting empowerment and social inclusion

*Decent work:* Eurochild contends that while enabling parents to have access to the labour market is usually the best means of helping families find their way out of poverty, it is by no means the only way, nor does it always solve the problem. For work to be a real route out of poverty it must offer a decent wage and skills progression. Precarious, insecure or temporary employment is not conducive to providing a positive family environment and may be detrimental for the well-being and education of the child. Hence, there seems to be a contradiction between the best interest of children and the demands of the labour market economy towards parents.

*Avoid stigmatisation:* Services must ensure that they reach out to the most vulnerable families, while avoiding any stigmatisation. Effective and universal policies should be complemented by targeted policies to address problems where they already exist and especially focus on the most disadvantaged situations (lone parent families, immigrant families, etc.).

The labour market participation may not be the only route to social inclusion. There must be more ways to participate in society. Eurochild strongly supports the development of strategies to combat social exclusion including active policies that provide alternative routes towards social cohesion for those who are furthest from the labour market. The adoption of a policy mix which involves not only labour force participation but also others forms of participating in the society are therefore strongly recommended promoting the empowerment of all.

### 3.5 Encouraging gender balance and combating stereotypes

A more modern division of domestic tasks and childcare between men and women and greater equality in the workplace are urgently needed. To a larger extent, the traditional role of men in society needs to change. All players – men, women and business – share the responsibility of modernising the system.

There is also a need to adapt to the different family structures and provide special measures for those most disadvantaged or currently excluded from existing legislation (namely, single-parent households, blended families, same-sex partners).

## 4. Key issues for debate

- A number of demographic and social changes have taken place (i.e., “beanpole” family<sup>2</sup>, “sandwich” generation<sup>3</sup>, active ageing, family breakdown), which are having a profound effect upon grandparenthood. Grandparents provide practical, emotional and financial support for their grandchildren. There should be greater recognition of their contribution and explicit attention to meeting their needs too.
- Whilst availability of childcare is clearly link to women’s labour force participation, it must not be the primary goal of such services. They must be above all considered as a way to invest in child’s development and education. For breaking cycles of family deprivation universal early childhood services are the best approach to ensure that all children have a fair start in life. Basic services should be accessible for all but the government has to make sure that the most disadvantaged groups are included in the system. Thus, the so

<sup>2</sup> Family structures with four or five generations but relatively few people in each generation.

<sup>3</sup> Generation of people, particularly women, who care for their aging parents while supporting their own children.

called “progressive universalism” – support for all, with more support for those who need it most – seem to be the most suitable way of intervening.

- The value of early intervention programmes should not result in neglecting the services for parents of older children such as teenagers. This seems to us to be a forgotten target where a gap is visible both in policy and in the research field.
- When we speak about gender stereotypes, a crucial issue is the almost complete absence of men in the child care profession. Especially in lone parent families – more often mothers – the risk is that children grow up in all female environments. Promoting male care responsibilities and increasing the number of men in care professions may therefore help to break such stereotypes from an early age.
- Female labour market participation is the most suitable means of combating child poverty, raising self-esteem of mothers and social inclusion. However, promoting employment must go hand-in-hand with policies that ensure decent work for all including decent pay and working conditions. Low paid and insecure work that puts additional stress on families is not in the best interest of the child and may have very negative consequences on his well-being.
- Strategies fostering male and female equal participation in the employment market, supporting services for families and favouring the balance of work and family life are welcome BUT the quality of child’s upbringing is a crucial piece of the puzzle. Policies that focus on the well-being of the children and their future inclusion into the society must go hand-in-hand with labour market policies, to ensure that the best interests of children are not sacrificed in our efforts to increase labour market participation.