

Supporting Parents to combine Work and Care: Policy Implications from 10 years of European Research

Policies to enable parents with young children to reconcile work and care are high on the political agenda in the UK but there is a long way to go before the state recognises that supporting families is a public issue and there is an urgent need to move to a positive model of care. Policies have been more to do with encouraging mothers to work than promoting the welfare of families or promoting equal opportunities for women. The question is what policies and provision best supports dual working parents and what lessons can the British Government learn from other countries? How can the government provide support which enables parents to balance their caring responsibilities with paid employment and supports mothers and fathers equally?

To answer these questions the New Europe Centre at the University of Aberdeen is working with the Work Foundation to disseminate the policy implications from 10 years of European Research into how parents can best be supported to combine work and care. Three events will be held in London with the first taking place in late October. The launch breakfast event will highlight the findings on flexi-security. It will be chaired by a well known journalist with guests including partners of the work Foundation, relevant third sector stakeholders, think tanks and other stakeholders. The second event will be an invited roundtable including civil servants and policy advisors focusing on quality of life, work and care. The third event will engage employers and discuss how they can support employees in their choices in work and life, including supporting fathers to play a larger role in family life.

The European research on work and care comes to four main conclusions. Firstly that combining work and care by both husband and wife is increasing seen as the norm and what parents want to do. Secondly that gender inequalities in the labour market and cultural attitudes mean that women are still seen as responsible for care and domestic work and do not have a genuine right to choose between care and paid work. Thirdly that for mothers the availability of childcare is the overwhelming determinant of if they work, and state child care provision is preferred to financial benefits. Parents want affordable quality childcare that meets their needs in terms of opening times and meets the cognitive needs of their children. Fourthly flexible working can be very important for dual earner families and self employment by one or both parents may be a positive or constrained choice. Employer driven flexibility generally has a negative impact for parents combining work and care but employee driven flexibility can be supportive. Regulatory frameworks are important in supporting parents in exercising their rights to flexible working. Policy recommendations arising from the review are:

Equal Opportunities

- Gender equality in the workplace and labour market must be progressed. Stronger equal opportunity policies as in the US should be introduced to achieve this. All relevant Government policies should be subject to a gender impact analysis.
- Policies should be informed by a life course perspective, for example the negative consequences for career, entitlement to social security benefits for women and men of taking periods outside the labour market to care should be compensated for.
- Legislation to enforce shorter working hours (as in France) to stop a long hour's culture amongst fathers and enable them to participate more in family life.
- The provision of paternity and other parental leave entitlements for fathers with adequate compensation to enable fathers to take it.
- Training for women on re-entry to enable them to resume their careers and compete for better quality jobs.
- Incentives for employers to encourage them to introduce family friendly policies and support men and women in taking their leave entitlement.

- Employers and TUs to support equal opportunity policies and promote a culture of equality in the workplace.

Parental Leave

- Well-paid adequate maternity and maternity leave are essential to support families. Men must be encouraged and supported in taking paternity leave which should 'lost' if it is not taken by the father.
- Parental leave (combined with child care support) should enable parents to make a genuine choice between returning to the labour market and taking a longer period of leave as the Finnish policy enables.

Flexi-security

- Well-paid flexible parental leave including 'daddy' leave should be available to enable parents to combine work and care. There should be a legal entitlement to such leave as in Scandinavian countries.
- Flexi-security is seen as a key aspect of European policy, but these policies must ensure flexibility and security for men and women. Not flexibility and security for men and flexibility without security for women. There should be a legal requirement for the right to flexible working – flexi-security as for example in Sweden, and the Netherlands. There should be decent pay for part time work as in the Netherlands.
- Trade Unions need to make their members aware of their rights to ask for flexible working times and to fight for working times that suit the family obligations of their members
- Employers need to be aware of the need for flexibility of their employees with small children or others that care and be aware of the business case for flexibility policies.

Childcare

- Childcare ranked along four dimensions access, quality, resources and inclusive context. Importance of childcare service of high quality that are adequately resourced.
- Substitute Care – child minders, nurseries, pre-school classes, school, after school and out of school provision should be affordable, professional, of high quality, adequate to meet the demand from all parents who want to access the services and the opening hours should be compatible with full-time employment as for example in Scandinavia. Class inequalities in access to affordable childcare need to be addressed.
- There should be a childcare policy for school aged children with adequate provision of out-of-school care.
- Incentives for employers to provide pre-school and out-of-school child care should be realistic and employers made aware of the business case for making such provision.
- Policies must recognise that reliance on informal care is precarious and may cause difficulties for parents and employers. The importance of grandparents in providing care needs to be given greater recognition. An unintended consequence of encouraging older women to enter the labour market is likely to be a reduction in the availability of grandmothers to provide care, something they do in all EU countries at least in emergencies.
- Informal carers should be given support so that they can meet the needs, including the cognitive development needs, of the child(ren) they care for, and parents should be able to use subsidies for childcare to pay informal carers.
- The qualifications required for early years child care should be upgraded and the remuneration of qualified care workers improved.