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# Introduction. Feminist Views on Social Policy and Gender Equality

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# Introduction. Feminist Views on Social Policy and Gender Equality

by Manuela Naldini

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Most of the changes in the gender system which we have witnessed in recent decades involve women moving into positions and activities previously restricted to men, with few changes in the opposite direction. In other words, women's life has changed much more than men's and we are still in the midst of a "stalled revolution" [Hochschild 1989]. The incomplete transformation of gender relations [Gerson 2010; Esping-Andersen 2009] in families, in social and labor market policies, both in their assumptions and in decision-making processes and bodies, together with changes in the labor market settings, has exacerbated long standing cross country, cross class and cross ethnic group inequalities among women. Less-educated women are now filling or replacing many service jobs in child and elderly care, in home and health care. This makes it easier for well-educated women to devote more time to paid work. Most jobs in the service sector are poorly paid and do not always give access to full social rights. In addition, outsourcing (part of) unpaid domestic and care work has expanded dramatically the market for domestic and care migrant workers, in a sort of "global care chains" [Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002], which increasingly draws women from poorer nations to provide domestic work and care in richer ones. This is well-known in Southern Europe, and especially in Italy with the increasing presence since the end of the 90s of migrant female carers ("badanti") mainly from Romania or other Eastern countries who play a major role in the Italian welfare state. As a result, care for the frail elderly shifted from a 'family' to a 'migrant-in-the-family' care model [Bettio *et al.* 2006; Naldini e Saraceno 2008]. This pattern is somehow less widespread

in those countries, mainly in the EU, where care services are publicly supported, formalized, professionalized, and centrally regulated [Pfau-Effinger and Geissler 2005].

In such scenario this symposium raises a few questions “What can be hoped for from the State” [Lewis, 1992]. Or, to re-phrase Ann Orloff’s contribution which opens this symposium, “Are welfare states – or at least some aspects of these complex systems – resources in the struggle for gender equality?” If yes, what kind of “gender equality” do women want to promote? Is gender equity achievable? In what countries and for whom? Which specific national problems and policy contexts are to be considered? What lesson can we learn from comparative studies? These are some of the questions to which the contributors of this symposium attempt to answer.

There are at least three reasons for focusing a symposium on the relationship between gender and welfare state.

*Gendering welfare state.* First, since the 1990s, the introduction of a gender perspective into the analysis of welfare regimes has provided one of the most innovative theoretical perspectives for understanding not only gender inequalities and developing proposals for institutional responses [see Gornick and Meyer 2009], but also for understanding the transformation of contemporary welfare states. This new perspective, on one hand has scrutinized several basic concepts in the mainstream welfare state literature by inquiring how they are gendered [Lewis 1992; Orloff 1993]. On the other, it has enriched the conceptual dimensions [Hobson 1990; McLaughlin and Glendinning 1994] in order to take into account the gender dimension of different “regimes types” or world of “welfare capitalism” [Esping-Andersen 1990].

In addition, in their analysis of the causes of gender inequality, feminist scholars have increasingly focused on the gender division of paid and unpaid work and particularly of the way responsibilities for caring needs are allocated within families and between families and the state [Daly and Rake 2003; Folbre 2009]. In so doing, they have contributed to reformulate the issues of fertility decline and of the risk of a care deficit due to the twin process of population ageing and increasing women’s labour market participation as issues which have their roots in the gender division of labour and in the societal arrangements built around it. The influence of gender has been so significant that it may be argued that “feminist scholarship changed the study of welfare state” [Orloff and Palier 2009, 410].

*Women’s interests, politics and feminist view on gender equity.* Second, the relationship between gender arrangements [Pfau Effinger 2005] and the welfare state introduces also the question of the role of women as social and political actors. Without assuming an “unproblematic” view of women as having all the same interests, which are different from those of men, the awareness that “gender matters,” renders the issue of the role of political participation and women’s mobilization around collect-

ive interests in promoting change, as well as that of differences among women, a crucial research but also political issue [for an historical perspective see e.g. Koven and Mitchell 1993; Pedersen 1993].

Feminist scholars have associated gender equity with two different notions: “difference” and “equality.” In short, It may be said that “equality” means treating women like men. Supporters of the “difference” notion of gender equality have stressed that such treatment has the shortcoming of considering “the male as the norm.” Egalitarians have criticized the “difference” approach because it relies on “essentialists” notions of femininity, which tend to reinforce gender inequalities in society. These two different notions also imply different strategies which should be put in place and a different role of the State (mainly the welfare state but also civil and family law) to achieve gender equality [see Gonzalez, Jurado and Naldini 2000].

Among feminist policy analysts, the work of Nancy Fraser [1994; Fraser 1997] has been extremely significant in offering a way out of the equality vs. difference dilemma. Fraser, reasoning about the future of social citizenship in post industrial welfare states, in fact, argues that that dilemma may be overcome through a synthesis of the two prevalent approaches, the “universal breadwinner” (which encourages women to act as men in the labor market) and the “care-giver parity model” (which compensates women for the economic disadvantages they experience because of their role as family caregivers) a new political ideal she calls “universal caregiver.” The first approach characterizes the contemporary politics of most USA feminists and liberals [see Gornick and Meyers 2009]. The second model has been long implicit in the politics of most European feminist and social democrats, but it is being partly replaced by the third, in so far a new generation of policies has started to redefine fathers as (also) carers. According to Fraser [1997, 60], policies should “induce men to become more like most women are now, namely people who do primary care-work.” In other words, for Fraser men, rather than women, have to be the focus of efforts to change, and a de-construction of gender differences is a pre-requisite for gender equity.

*Reorientation of welfare state and new policy paradigms on gender equality.* Third, at the turn of the new Millennium, not only in Western countries, but also in the Global South, as the contribution of Rianne Mahon in this volume shows, policies for gender equality have been embodied in the new paradigm of “activation”, with a new focus on work and on “reconciling work and family”. This incorporation is not without problems. Yet, it also testifies the increasing visibility of the “gender equality” issue and of feminist scholarship and activism, and their influence in the way policy agendas are framed and argued for [Orloff and Palier 2009].

Within wider Europe, the goal of “gender equality” has been re-framed as equal opportunities for men and women to be integrated into the labor market. Accord-

ing to various authors [Stratigaki 2004; Lewis 2006], the re-orientation of “gender equality” goals goes more in the direction of encouraging women’s participation in employment rather than in warranting equal opportunity between men and women in job and career opportunities as well as other societal spheres. Gender “equality,” as Björnberg contribution in this volume shows, has remained a priority in social policy at national level only in Scandinavian countries [Ellingsaeter and Leira 2006].

Beyond the EU borders, at supra-national level, as illustrated by Mahon [2006], the OECD contributes a new way of framing social policy problems. According to OECD’s reports, women’s participation in the labor market is now seen as the solution to every problems of developed countries. Mother’s participation in the labor market is seen as one of the most important ways to fight poverty, to increase fertility and to solve the problem of ageing population. This implies a “farewell to maternalism,” as in USA case (see Orloff in this symposium), that is, to reduce, or eliminate, policies (such as the survivor pension, or special provisions for poor lone mothers) inspired by the recognition of motherhood as a positive social status (on the basis of the notion of gender “difference”), regardless of occupation status. This recognition had been particularly important in liberal countries for poor lone-mothers. On the contrary, the new policy paradigm requires activation for all into the market, making paid work more attractive than social assistance by a combination of tightening the rules of the latter, supporting the creation of a labor market for low-skilled and low paid jobs and introducing tax credits for the working poor. For working mothers, social policy based on the new social policy paradigm should encourage as much as possible parental “choice”: through: *a*) parental leaves, which should not be too long, but well paid, and *b*) childcare and education services. “Gender equality” is intended first of all as women’s employment at the same rate of men, while, no men’s changes are required or are the main target of social policy. In the field of childcare, policies oscillate, depending on the country, between a social investment approach, focused on early education, and a caring time approach, focused mainly on partly freeing mother from caring time in order to facilitate their participation to the labor market [see Mahon 2006; Saraceno 2011]. In turn, these two approaches create also two different labor markets for child carers. In Short, in EU “discourses” and OECD statements equal opportunity between men and women and policy for supporting it, are re-framed mainly as social policies supporting the “egalitarian” vision of gender relation and family model and encouraging families to combine family and work. The issue of unequal distribution of unpaid care work in the home, which contributes to gender inequalities in the labor market, and in other important sphere of life, remains untouched.

The five contributions included in this symposium, focus on the relationship between gender, labor market, family and the role of the welfare state in promoting gender equality or a higher level of gender equity. In different ways, all five intersect the four feminist debates I have synthetically summarized.

The mutual influence of gender and welfare state is major evidence stemming from Orloff's paper. She focuses on care as the issue central to many feminist understandings of gender and welfare state, due to the fact that having to provide care is a major source of many of women's economic and political disadvantages. Orloff's work clearly shows how persisting gendered division of labor, different models of family life and social policy have contributed to a shift from the *male breadwinner model* to the *adult worker family model*, with strong differentiation between national contexts also in terms of quality of care. Power and politics are the focus of the second part of Orloff's analysis, which shows how gender has been at the center of changes in the welfare state, the family and in capitalist economics. Increasingly, several tenets of gender equality have been institutionalized and a new form of feminist mobilization has emerged.

The continuing invisibility of unpaid work is the central issue discussed by Saraceno's contribution. Focusing on and unpacking unpaid family work, she moves beyond the issue of care. Based on the overview of most recent studies, her contribution shows the extent to which unpaid domestic work is really the most resistant to change. Saraceno's focus is on two types of explanations for the persistence of gender inequalities in domestic work namely: those which look at microdynamics of power resource negotiations and "doing gender" and those which highlight the importance of national and institutional contexts (family and gender policies, but also women's employment rates and working time regimes). Both these kinds of explanation offer important insights. But they remain partial and sometime offer contradictory results. On the basis of the finding that even in the best practice cases men seem not to go beyond a threshold in sharing unpaid domestic work, and that in many countries increasing work pressures seem to have slowed down the trend towards a more balanced sharing, following Fraser, Saraceno argues that part of the problem lies in the "adult worker family model," in so far this ignores the needs which are addressed by unpaid family work.

The tensions between work and family, "equality" vs. "difference," the public and private spheres, the North and the South, in social policy and in different national contexts are at the center of Björnberg and Mahon's contributions.

Empirical evidence from the Nordic landscape, which is the main focus of the Björnberg analysis, shows how family practices and gender structures are highly resistant to change. In an international perspective, the Nordic countries in general, and

the Scandinavian welfare states in particular, have been regarded as landmarks in the advancement of gender equality. Yet, the outcomes of the model, seen through family practices, leave a lot of room for women and men to reproduce the traditional gender structure. A stalled revolution? This is one of the main questions raised in Björnberg's work. Without reservation it may be argued that the Nordic welfare state has achieved important results in terms of gender equality. Important results have been achieved in the public sector, in social policy, and in care, for children or for disabled people. Yet, labor market gender segregation and pay gap remain pronounced. The focus of Björnberg is however, in line with Saraceno's discussion, not on care, but on the division of domestic work, which in family practices, remains remarkably resistant to change even in the Scandinavian countries. A recent introduction of tax-reduction for purchase of domestic services in Sweden strengthens, according to Björnberg, inequalities in gender patterns between social classes, since are primarily women well off that can afford to purchase private services. Nevertheless, one of the most dramatic indicators of gender inequalities in Sweden is the fact that male violence within the family is still widespread and is a "social problem". Counteracting men's violence against women has been a high priority of the current Swedish's government. As a result of this government action plan, more women are now reporting their cases to the police and the courts; but to curb this type of violence remains a problem in Sweden as in other countries.

In his analysis Mahon considers the changes in labor market and social policy occurring in different part of the Global World. Yet, the middle-income countries of Latin America, whose regimes are similar to those of the South European ("conservative-familialist") welfare state, have recently received some advice (or prescriptions) from the World Bank which helped in shaping policy agendas in Latin America. According to Mahon, because of new economic pressures, the middle income countries of South America are shifting social policy orientation from "conservative-informal" to "liberal-informal." The emerging "liberal informal" model resulted in two concomitant phenomena, i.e. the rise of informal employment and women's participation in the paid labor market, which generated new work-family tensions. Tension emerged, especially because of the development of childcare policy, between the view of the World Bank to promote "children investment" (this type of childcare target the very poor and being mainly based on informal work done by poor women), and "gender equality."

Particularly in the policies addressing poor households, which are the bulk of family policies in these countries, investment in children *de facto* has move to commodify care, as in other part of North America and Europe, but has done little to challenge the idea that it is women's work and hence of low value. As a matter of

the fact, job related to childcare programs in Latin America rarely provide an entry point to formal sector jobs thus do not confer social security benefits. Moreover, this type of childcare arrangements are insufficient to help mothers' conciliation issues (i.e. the majority of preschool programs are part day). In looking at developments in Latin America, in North America and in other European countries, however, one must be careful not to be "fatally parochial in comparative perspective" [Therborn 2006] and to avoid proposing "utopias" which are socially and culturally embedded [Hassim 2009].

Traditionally, according to comparative research, welfare state and gender relationship have so far been nationally focused. Zippel's analysis goes beyond national boundaries, focusing on the international mobility of academics. Her contribution considers how the different welfare states and public policies affect gendered opportunities and constraints of mobility for highly-skilled workers. Looking beyond traditional literature and based on empirical work (97 interviews), the analysis shows how in the globalised world, gender and citizenship intersect. The gender order of society and the resistance to change by institutions is evident from Zippel's study. In particular, her study highlights how social policy models all over the developed countries are strongly based on the "adult worker" or "universal breadwinner" model, that is, on the assumption that all able bodied adults are in the labor market full time full life, without having any care responsibility. While policies and practices concerning the internationalization of science appear to be gender neutral, Zippel's analysis shows that the globalization of science is a highly gendered process, even for highly privileged academic women "scientists."

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**Abstract:** Most of the changes in the gender system which we have witnessed in recent decades involve women moving into positions and activities previously restricted to men, with few changes in the opposite direction. The incomplete transformation of gender relations in families, in social policy and labour market assumptions and in decision-making processes and bodies, together with changes in the labour market, has exacerbated long-standing gender inequalities in the globalized economies. As a result, inequalities among women across different social classes and ethnic groups have also become more pronounced. Since the 1990s, gender-sensitive welfare regime analyses have provided one of the most innovative theoretical perspectives for understanding the main problems and developing proposals for institutional responses. The introduction to this symposium focuses on gender, labour market, family and on the role of welfare states in promoting gender equality or at least a higher level of gender equity. It raises a few questions on the between gender and welfare state to which the contributions contained in this symposium attempt to answer.

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*Keywords:* feminism, welfare state, gender, Europe, family.

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**Manuela Naldini** is a sociologist, associate professor at University of Turin, Italy. She obtained her PhD at the European University in Florence. She teaches Sociology of the Family and Sociology of Gender at the faculty of Political Sciences University of Turin. Among her main publications: "Should I stay or should I go? Combining work and care for an older parent in Italy," in *South European Society & Politics* [with B. Da Roit, forthcoming]; "Social and Family Policies in Italy: Not Totally Frozen But Far From Structured Reforms", in *Social Policy & Administration* [with C. Saraceno, 2008]; *Le politiche sociali in Europa* [2006]; *The Family in the Mediterranean Welfare States* [2003].