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Francesca Bettio, Janneke Plantenga and Mark Smith (eds.), "Gender and the European Labour Market". New York: Routledge, 2013, 248 pp.

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Book reviews

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Gender equality has always been a constituent part of the European social model, although its focuses and directions have changed over time. It was for long based on the principle of equal pay for equal work, with a progressive move from the original gender-neutral preoccupation with unfair competition to concerns of inequality. Since the early 1990s the focus has shifted to the issue of work-family reconciliation and in particular to the “defamilialisation” of care responsibilities, this being seen as a crucial pre-condition for gender equality in the labour market. In the past decade, the support for women’s employment continuity has also received impetus from other rationales besides gender equality and women’s empowerment. It is convenient – the argument runs – for economic growth and the sustainability of the economy and society at large, since it implies higher family incomes, greater job opportunities, and also, in the absence of strong work-childrearing tradeoffs, higher fertility rates. Moreover, work-family reconciliation enables achievement of a better employment/population ratio that can pay the costs of welfare, and it furnishes families with more resources, thus reducing the risk of poverty and stimulating consumption. Finally, work-family reconciliation policies, in particular ones centered on good-quality early childhood education and care, represent a social investment that pays off in terms of children’s wellbeing and overall equality because it protects women, families and children from poverty, and it provides young children from different backgrounds with a “strong start.”

Framed within this European discourse and action, the book *Gender and the European Labour Market*, edited by Bettio, Plantenga and Smith, offers an overview of current debate and data on women’s and men’s positions in all European countries, linking them to gender models at both the micro and macro level. On the one hand, the book analyses the latest trends in levels and types of employment, working time, the distribution of unpaid work, and social (especially care) provisions; on the other, it examines key policies such as care and reconciliation policies, taxation and flexisecurity, also in response to the current recession.

More in detail, the book starts with discussion of the possible conceptual variants and empirical measures of gender equality. In Europe, gender equality has been recognised as a fundamental value by the Treaty of the European Union and implicitly as an economic good in the female employment rate and childcare targets set by the recent Lisbon Process. However, the predominant approach is still that, although pursuit of the gender equality goal is largely the right thing to do, it may clash with goals of competitiveness, economic growth or budgetary tightening. In the chapter *Do we have a case for gender equality?*, Smith, Akram-Lodhi and Bettio show that non-equality is a cost, and that equality can have positive economic outcomes in a number of ways: through a quantitative and qualitative improvement in female participation, and full utilisation of their investments in human capital; through the enhanced possibility of women and

families to consume goods and services; through an increase in fertility and in the integration of women into the fiscal system, both of which are essential for economic growth, future labour supply and sustainable public finances. In the following chapter, Plantenga and Remery move to the issue of how to measure gender equality. They discuss both “the algebra” and the underlying philosophies of four possible indexes, and then show that, despite differences, rankings of countries based on each of them yield similar results at the “extreme,” with the Scandinavian group at the top of the gender equality achievement scale and the Southern and Eastern European group at the bottom.

The second part of the book explores changing behaviours and policies in the distribution of care and work. It starts with an analysis by Francavilla, Giannelli, Mangiavacchi and Piccoli on the world of unpaid work. The picture that emerges is well known: although men have become more collaborative, the load of domestic and care work remains upon women’s shoulders, with an increase in its overall and relative weight with the arrival of children. Unexpectedly, they also show that gender gaps in childcare increase with the level of education. However, context again matters, since gaps within and across genders are less marked in Scandinavian countries, where not only work but also care is valued and supported, for both fathers and mothers. In the following chapter, Plantenga and Remery consider the other side of the coin, so to speak: the world of paid work. They look at cross-country differences in flexible working arrangements and their link with levels of gender equality. Their conclusion is that configurations of flexibility most in line with gender equality are those that do not weaken mothers’ and fathers’ labour market attachment and commitment. These policies are therefore those that shift emphasis from flexibility in working hours to flexibility in working time schedules and in the workplace. The last two chapters of this second part of the book focus on the macro institutional level. They analyse care and reconciliation policies both “upwards” and ‘downwards’ from intergenerational ties: that is, towards children and frail elderly persons. Yet, also here the focus remains on the macro-micro link. It does so in the chapter by Plantenga and Remery on leaves and childcare services through an analysis of women’s and men’s levels of employment and use of services; and it does so in the chapter by Simonazzi and Picchi on new trends in elderly care towards home care and market provision, with consideration of their impact upon care givers and care receivers. Both studies conclude that, in order to overcome the cost-quality tradeoff and the risk of class polarisations, a form/degree of subsidisation is needed if irregular or badly paid care work models or care unaffordable for most families are to be avoided.

In the third part of the book, the attention turns to recent policy developments in response to new economic and social scenarios. It opens with Villa’s critical reconstruction of how meanings of gender equality have changed since the launching of EES in 1998. Whilst in the early 1990s work-family reconciliation was associated with equal opportunities policies, since the end of the 1990s it has been more firmly integrated into the Guidelines accompanying EES and more narrowly and instrumentally linked to employment policies. This shift, however, has entailed a form of “gender-neutralisation:” with the emphasis on the provision of childcare services in order to promote “an adult worker model family,” the issue of care – its provision not only “outside families by the market or the state,” but also, within families, “from women to men” – has been overshadowed. As a result, the goal of promoting gender equality by changing the behaviour

of men has increasingly slipped out of the picture. Yet, as Fagan and Norman remind us in their chapter, it is only by reducing gender segregation both in the labour market and the household that what is called “the stalled revolution” can be completed. This “rebooting” process requires support for the closer involvement of men in parenting and other aspects of family life through the design of paternity and parental leaves and of family-friendly working time arrangements. It also requires cultural and institutional action to reduce men’s underrepresentation in social care jobs, so as to weaken the gender stereotypes and prejudices which constrain opportunities for both sexes. The importance of gender equality both in the home and at work risks being further obscured by the current economic and fiscal crisis. As Smith and Villa argue in the final chapter, women’s jobs and wages have so far been relatively sheltered from the worst effects of the crisis. Yet the prevalent rhetoric on the impossibility of investing in social care – the latter being seen to clash with goals of competitiveness and economic growth or budgetary tightening – is certainly not set to favour women and gender equality.

By using large comparable individual and institutional datasets made available by researches performed within the EU Expert Groups on Gender Equality (EGGE), and its successor, the European network of Experts on Gender Equality (ENEGE), Gender and the European Labour Market has the indubitable merit of furnishing up-to-date facts and figures covering a large number of countries and topics. Moreover, it reviews current debates, comprehensively addressing the issue of gender equality policy at the European level, with an overall critical assessment of the actual impact of the European Employment Strategy (EES). Most interestingly, contrary to the current European tendency to frame gender equality only in terms of levels of labour market participation, this book also considers men and the gender division of unpaid work, in awareness that a precondition for gender equality in the labor market is encouragement of the “feminization” of men’s life courses.

However, such encouragement cannot neglect the role of cultural norms and their construction within families. These norms are not detached from social policies. Policies, in fact, affect not only the time and economic resources available to actors but also their preferences. Policies assume and produce different ideologies of gender, and they institutionalize different normative definitions of the proper form of gender relations, women’s involvement in the labor market, the “good” mother and the “good” father, and the proper locus and standard of care. Moreover, neglect of prevalent cultural norms and practices within families may “neutralize” the goal pursued by an “innovative” policy measure. The authors of the book are surely aware of such complex interdependencies, which are mentioned. However, explicit and deeper analysis of the interplay among culture, institutions and behaviors, and on what happens within families – in particular on how men and women negotiate and build their choices in response to both instrumental and moral rationalities – could have further enriched the book.

In the same vein, the ambivalences that the book convincingly highlights within the overly “employment-led” European approach would have benefited from further discussion of the non-economic dimensions of gender equality and citizenship rights. As many scholars argue [e.g. Lewis 2006, Gornick and Meyers 2003, Daly 2011] in line with those in the book, care has never been the main focus of mainstream welfare analyses, nor of policy-making. The result has been a specific normative model in social policy

centred on the promotion of active welfare and women's labour-market attachment, within individualisation and the universal adult worker model. Yet this entails a set of assumptions about individuals and their work and family lives that are not gender neutral. By valorising and promoting individual agency and self-sufficiency and shifting some child-and elderly-care from the family without at the same time encouraging the gender distribution of care within families, current European policies continue to produce forms (albeit changed ones) of familism. Rather than an unequivocal move to an individualized worker model, therefore, a dual earner, gender-specialized, family arrangement is being promoted. Moreover, by focusing mainly on the economic benefits of improved women's labour market positions (for competitiveness and growth, for demographic balance, for poverty reduction) and by considering mainly work and income and less time as a citizenship right, the European discourse and actions risk erasing other crucial dimensions of peoples' lives and well-being, such as happiness, personal freedom, time richness.

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