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FAMILY POLICY IN FRANCE: OLD CHALLENGES, NEW TENSIONS

JEANNE FAGNANI*

France has a long-standing and “explicit” family policy that is overseen by government institutions and the subject of official reports produced annually. The “family” as such is legally recognised as an institution that plays an important role in the maintenance of social cohesion. The appointment of a minister responsible for family issues demonstrates the importance given to this issue.

French family policy involves a rich array of cash benefits and services. It also stands out, along with the Scandinavian countries, for its strong support of maternal employment. In a similar vein, France leads the European Union in public childcare provision and benefits aimed at reducing child care costs for families. As a matter of fact, the progressive arrival of mothers on the labour market since the 1970s has, through an interactive process, prompted family policy to introduce a whole range of services for parents in paid employment which in turn have enabled a growing number of mothers to have access to jobs. It has also helped to put the question of “social care” (Daly and Lewis 2000) for dependents firmly onto the policy agenda.

In the first section, the institutional and historical context will be presented. I shall highlight, in particular, the dynamic of the interactions at play between this policy and female employment behaviour since the 1970s. Second, I will demonstrate that although the French welfare state is often characterised as a conservative, corporatist welfare regime in most cross-national research (Arts and Gelissen 2002), it differs when child care and public support for working mothers are taken into account. In conclusion, I shall comment on what is currently at stake in French family policy.

Family policy in France since 1945: brief historical and institutional background

A special branch of the social security administration, created in 1945, is devoted to family policy. The

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principal administration is carried out by the National Family Allowance Fund (Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales, CNAF), which covers more than 90 percent of all recipient families. Theoretically, the social partners (including family organisations) represented on the Executive Board of the CNAF periodically determine the orientations of the different areas for intervention in family policy. In practice, decisions are made by the government, whether approved or not by the Executive Board of the CNAF. It is solely at the local level, and only when assistance to and measures in favour of families are required, that the Executive Boards of the CAFs (local Family Allowance Funds) have any real decision-making power, and in particular, a margin for manoeuvre in the provision and development of childcare services.

The resources allocated to the family branch of social security continue to remain close to the European average. In the early 2000s, France earmarked approximately 10 percent of welfare expenditure for “families/children”. In the eighties, more than 90 percent of the resources allocated to the family sector were provided by contributions paid by employers. Over the last decade, the funding structure has undergone a profound transformation with an increase in the proportion represented by ear marked taxes and state budget spending.

Family allowances (*Allocations familiales, corresponding to Kindergeld*) represent the main cash benefit scheme. A law passed in 1975 extended its payment to all families: parents no longer needed to be in work, thus breaking with the principle of insurance-related benefits. The *Allocations familiales* are not income-related and not taxable. In accordance with a long-standing historical natalist approach, and despite constant demands from family organisations, families with only one child are denied family allowances. However, in line with one of the goals of family policy to reduce child poverty, families with one child are entitled to a means-tested benefit if the child is aged under three years (Commaille, Strobel and Villac 2002).

Family policy still bears the traces of earlier history; its system of transfers (family allowances, means-tested benefits and “*quotient familial*”) follows a long-established natalist and familialist tradition and continues to favour large families (with three or more children). Its main objective is to partly compensate for the financial cost of having children. Tax law favours couples, whether married or not, with chil-

dren. The aim is horizontal redistribution (from those with no children to those with children), an objective still supported by numerous politicians at both ends of the political spectrum.

The “*quotient familial*” operates as follows: within this family-based splitting system, the number of children is taken into account in calculating the tax liability, the total household income is divided by the number of family members, the relevant and progressive tax rate is applied to this income per adult equivalent (one “share” for an adult, one “half-share” for the first and second children, one “share” for the third and subsequent children), and the resultant sum then multiplied by the number of family members. At the same income level, a family with three children will pay less than a family with only one child. This tax system is frequently subject to criticism by trade unions and leftist political parties arguing that it should be limited to vertical redistribution, as it is in Sweden.

Contrary to the pension system, no retrenchment measures have recently been implemented in the family policy branch of the social security system (Palier 2002). This mirrors the salience of family-related issues in the social and political agenda. This also reflects the fact that the family branch and its large network of Local Allowance Funds (*CAFs*) are responsible for the management of welfare state provisions. The family branch is a transfer-heavy system which also aims at reducing social inequalities and fighting against poverty. For instance *CAFs* provide more than one million households with the Minimum Income Benefit (*RMI*) introduced in 1988. These measures are successful in reducing the poverty rate among families, in particular lone parent families. Despite the dramatic increase since the nineties in the number of welfare recipients, no real welfare-to-work programmes have been adopted.

The progressive entry of women into the workforce: a driver for change in family policy

Since the 1970s, against the background of an increase in mothers’ labour force participation, the work/life balance as an issue has gained increasing salience in political life and has come to the forefront of the social policy agenda. Boundaries between state, families and market have been redrawn, evidence that the progressive entry of women into the workforce has been a driver for change in the French welfare regime (Fagnani 2000).

In the post-war years, the legislators were very much concerned about the high infant mortality rate. In order to encourage mothers to stay at home, couples with at least two children were offered financial incentives in the form of the “*Allocation de Salaire Unique*” (Single Salary Allowance; Martin 1998). Until the 1960s, France promoted the male breadwinner model through generous assistance to families where only the man was in paid work. However, from the 1970s onwards, political mobilisation of women and women’s organisations played a significant role in demands for public child care facilities and services.

Against this background, political actors were inclined to win women’s votes on the basis of their support for child care provision. In the context of an acute labour shortage (there was a growing demand for qualified women to occupy jobs in the tertiary sector) policy-makers became increasingly receptive to the arguments of early childhood specialists in favour of crèches. For the first time, the programme of the Sixth Plan tackled the issue of childcare provision: local Family Allowance Funds obtained additional funding to take partial responsibility for the running costs of public childcare services, including crèches, and to improve the quality of care for infants and young children by contributing to improving the qualifications of childcare staff.

At the same time, legislators took a further decisive step with the creation of a childcare allowance for families where the mother worked outside the home. This decision was particularly symbolic in that it also decreed that the Single Salary Allowance would henceforth only be granted to low-income families. Within this context, crèches, recreational centres and holiday camps for employees’ children were also organised by several companies at the instigation of their respective works committees.

In the second half of the 1970s the rise in the number of crèche places and the increasing attendance of young children at nursery school (“*école maternelle*”) finally gave a decisive impetus to policies that were beginning to integrate the “working mother” model. The 1977 law allowed registered “childminders”, restricted until then by the vagueness and ambiguity of their positions, access to proper employee status and its associated rights. This law also marked the first steps leading to social recognition of the importance of the quality of childcare; emphasis was placed on the child’s intellectual and

emotional awakening, in order to encourage its general sense of “well-being”.

Militant action and information campaigns organised by the National Association of Nursery Nurses, doctors in the *Protection Maternelle et Infantile* (a statutory service responsible for health care of children aged under six years and supervising crèches and registered childminders) and psychologists were beginning to bear fruit. The early socialisation of young children was promoted by stressing that crèches were an “ideal” preparation for entry into nursery school. When the left came to power at the beginning of the 1980s, trade unionists and political decision-makers spoke increasingly of the need to develop a childcare policy to assist “mothers” to combine work and family life. The progressive construction of policy orientated towards working parents interacted with the change in women’s attitudes vis-à-vis paid work in a snowball effect that resulted in a rise in the number of working mothers.

The existence of the *école maternelle*, an institution created in the late nineteenth century under the Third Republic, added to the growing movement in favour of public responsibility for young children (Morgan 2002). Nearly a third of children aged under three and 100 percent of those aged three to six now attend this free, full-day *école maternelle*. The presence of a canteen and out-of-school-hours care centre have enabled more mothers to work full-time. Furthermore, local authorities have considerably developed recreational activities (leisure centres, for example) to keep schoolchildren occupied on Wednesday afternoons or after school using financial assistance from the local *CAFs*.

Childcare policies: A tool to fight unemployment?

As far as childcare policies are concerned, France is much more similar to the Nordic countries than to Germany: in comparative and cross-national research, France is always one of the cluster of countries with policies that provide extensive support for maternal employment (Gornick and Meyers 2003, FFGHC 2004). Childcare policies are based on the principle that children are considered as both private and public goods. And there is a strong consensus that responsibility for children should be shared between the family and the state, which is expected to intervene not only to help families but also to protect children.

The move towards individualized childcare arrangements

From 1991 to 2002 the number of places in crèches rose from 112,000 to 203,000. Despite efforts by the *CNAF* (in the form of financial assistance) to encourage local authorities to develop this type of provision, the supply of places still falls short of demand; only 10 percent of children aged under three are cared for in crèches. This shortage of places is detrimental for low-income families. For them, it is the cheapest childcare arrangement as fees in crèches are income-related and they cannot afford to rely on other formal child care arrangements, such as a nanny at home or a registered childminder, even if child care allowances help them to reduce the costs. This represents a sharp departure from one of the principles guiding public action in childcare policy: to give all children equal opportunities, irrespective of their social background.

Since the beginning of the nineties, the changes associated with increasing flexibility at the workplace (in particular the development of flexible work schedules) have led to rising demand for flexible forms of child care arrangements. In the context of rising unemployment, the government (under the regime headed by Premier Balladur, a member of one of the right-wing parties in power) therefore decided, in 1994, to exploit the job-creating potential of the childcare sector, and to dramatically increase both child care allowances and special tax breaks to help families meet the costs of “individualised” child care arrangements (childminders and home helps). It was the hope of the government to encourage families with young children to create employment and at the same time to bring more domestic workers into the formal economy. Adopting the rhetoric of “free choice for parents”, and of “diversification of childcare arrangements”, successive governments have begun to use family policy as a tool to fight unemployment.

As a matter of fact, with the aim of decreasing the unemployment rate, the government decided, in the same Family Law of 1994, to encourage economically active parents (in reality mothers) having a second child to opt for “staying-at-home” after maternity leave by providing them with an *Allocation Parentale d’Education* (APE, Child Rearing Benefit), a flat-rate benefit, on the condition that they stop working or work on a part-time basis. Since 2004, working parents with only one child are also entitled to this

benefit but only for six months after the maternity or paternity leaves. To be eligible to this benefit, parents are required to have worked or be registered as unemployed before the birth. Despite a gender-neutral discourse, 98 percent of beneficiaries are women.

This scheme is very successful among low paid mothers. This current situation bears witness to the ambiguities of family policy; measures geared at working parents are being implemented in tandem with incentive for mothers to stop working for a certain period of time, at least until the child is three years old. As a result, since the nineties, the increase in funds allocated by the CNAF towards *crèches* has been modest when compared with the much higher funding allocated to childcare carried out by individuals and to the APE.

Nevertheless, unlike Germany, it is currently quite socially acceptable for a child under three years of age to be taken care of in public day care facilities for the whole day while his/her parents are at work (Fagnani 2004). Early socialisation is even considered to be of great value, particularly by the educated middle classes. In fact the image of the *crèche* benefited from a long tradition, stretching back to the nineteenth century, of public responsibility for young children (Morgan 2002). In total, in dual-earner families, approximately seven out of ten children under three years of age attend either a *crèche* or nursery school or are the subject of subsidised childcare, whether this be a paid childminder or help in their own home or one of the two parents receiving the Child Rearing Benefit. All these figures are already beyond the targets for 2010 that were set at the European Summit of Barcelona held in 2002.

This large range of policies and schemes in favour of the work/life balance enables a better understanding of differences in mothers' labour force participation between European countries. France, along with Scandinavian countries, has one of the highest activity rates for women with children, whereas in the UK, Germany or the Netherlands, one-and-a-half earner households are the current norm. In France, among the majority of dual-earner couples with children, both partners work full-time.

For both economic and cultural reasons and as a result of the struggles by the women's movement, family policy has progressively integrated the "working mother model" and the range of measures to help working parents has recently been expanded yet

again. Public expenditures in favour of the development of child care arrangements and parental leaves have dramatically increased over the last two decades. Despite the slowdown in its expansion, the system of public *crèches* has not faced funding cutbacks. On the other hand, the progressive introduction of measures and schemes to support "working mothers" and the modernisation of child rearing norms have coalesced to justify in the eyes of couples, and more particularly women, both having children and being present on the labour market (Fagnani 2004). This also helps to account for why fertility rates in France are well above the EU average. This is partly attributable to the fact that women do not feel obliged to choose between childrearing and pursuing a career (Fagnani 2002). Where childcare norms are concerned, as a result of an interactive process, the attitudes of French women are in tune with the premises of family policy.

Recently under the socialist government, a serious attempt to change the gender relations of care within families was made; official rhetoric on family issues emphasised the right of both parents to be present with a newborn baby. This resulted in the decision to extend paternity leave (paid at full rate under a certain ceiling by health insurance) from three to fourteen days from January 2002. This was aimed at encouraging a less unequal division of unpaid work within couples. However, research has provided evidence that policies governments have been introducing since the eighties still fall short of a strong gender-egalitarian approach. Lingering assumptions about gender underpin the notion that it is legitimate for mothers to work full time unless they remain primarily responsible for managing everyday family life. Even in full-time dual-earner couples, working mothers are still expected to be less committed to their job than their partner.

This enduring asymmetry between sexes in the family partly explains the persistence of gender discrimination in the labour market. Moreover, the caring job sector remains largely female-dominated: in public childcare facilities, staffs are only female. Childminders and home helpers are also women. This maintains the idea that caring is only a woman's issue. Moreover, except in public childcare facilities, care jobs are poorly qualified and low paid.

Conclusion

Because of intimate links to employment policy and in a context of cost-containment, policies aimed at

helping working parents are torn between the political will to promote gender equality and the social need to fight unemployment. The increase in means-tested benefits also mirrors the growing concern over social inequalities. As a result, criticisms of complexity and lack of clarity are more and more frequent. Corporatism and conflicting interests explain why successive government attempts to simplify the family benefit system have resulted in only piecemeal measures which have reinforced rather than reduced complexity.

Significant shifts have occurred over the last three decades, in particular since the beginning of the 1990s, in the area of maternal employment support, but family policy has become too complex and is still fluctuating between different and sometimes antagonistic objectives, a phenomenon which weakens its efficiency, its coherence and corrodes its social legitimacy.

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